

17<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)  
(Genesis 18: 20-32 / Luke 11: 1-13)  
24.07.2016

Today's first reading is a text that has spoken to me much over the years.

Each time I hear it proclaimed, invariably, stored memories from my early years are awakened within me afresh. Growing up in Belfast, I used to serve Mass each morning at the local convent. I can still hear today's first reading – Abraham's pleading with God's angels – being read by two different Poor Clare Colettine nuns: the late Sr Anthony and the late Sr Francis. Both of these women had quite distinctive voices. My stored memories date back to just after the introduction of the present lectionary in 1970, for, it was precisely around this time that the Sisters began to minister as *readers* at the Eucharist: the nuns would do the first reading each morning and, even though I was still only a child, I would read the responsorial psalm, and, when there was one, the second reading.

The day I first heard Sr Anthony read the famous passage from Genesis 18 – the story which recounts Abraham's intercession on behalf of the people he loved and cared for – young and all as I was, I would say a *comprehension* was given to me, certainly an *appreciation*, of the gift of intercessory prayer. By the grace of God, I was accorded a small insight into the love that inspires those who offer such prayer for others. I came to understand intercessory prayer to be precisely an expression of love.

Yes, to intercede is well and truly a gift of love for others: a way of living out and engaging oneself in, God's own loving concern for those whom He places upon our hearts to pray for. In those formative years of my life, marked by my daily contact with the Poor Clare community, a group of women who committed themselves to intercede for the world, I came to see the vital importance of living a ministry of compassion in the Church, which holds intercessory prayer at its heart. I came to believe in intercessory prayer as a gentle, loving, power for good that the Lord has confided to each one of us, and, through which, He invites us to collaborate with Him for the well-being of all. It would be fair to say that the sense/intuition (call it what you will) that was given to me away back, some 45 years ago, has never left me since. I came to see then what I still believe to be true: namely, that God takes us seriously in our prayer when we live up to our responsibility to intercede for our world.

I suppose the fact that I knew that the nuns who proclaimed the Word of God in the Genesis text they read lived their lives interceding much for others gave weight to their proclamation of this Scriptural text. It helped make its message all the more credible to me.

Practically every time I hear this same Genesis text, I am also led to recall a conversation I had with my late mother about this same passage of the Bible. That conversation took place on a later date. Walking home from Mass with her one morning – a day when it was Sr Francis who had read the passage from Genesis 18 at Eucharist – we spoke about the significance of the passage we had heard read. It really struck a chord with me when my mother shared with me in the course of our discussion that she believed that what our land needed at that time (this was in the years of *the Troubles*) was a small group of men dedicated to intercede for peace and reconciliation; men and women who would pray and work for the healing of our divisions, the wounds and scandal of which they were the cause. I felt challenged by her remark – and it remained with me. It still remains with me as a conviction which I adhere to and in which I share. I am convinced that the bitterly divided and war-torn world in which we live desperately needs men and women who are ready to uphold and sustain it by their prayer. Our own land still needs such men and women. I see it to be part of our community's vocation in this place to carry all God's People upon our hearts in prayer and by our whole way of life to seek to be a ferment of reconciliation and peace.

All this leads me to invite you to reflect with me now upon the Genesis text the Sacred Liturgy has proposed for our meditation this Sunday, in a bid to arrive at a deeper appreciation of the teaching

contained in this story, with the hope that we will better see its implications for our own lives of prayer.

I believe the text heard from Genesis 18 touches upon something we all face at times in our lives: namely, worry – it would be better to say concern – for people we truly love; concern for people we really care for, and whom we see to be at risk as they follow the train of life they are following. Would it not be true to say that there are people for whom each one of us carries a real concern, while they themselves remain seemingly oblivious to all that is potentially self-destructive – and certainly unworthy of their *true self* – in the way they are living their lives? Does it not happen that we see people so caught up in their affairs, their apparent achievements and successes, that they themselves just don't seem to be able to see the perils involved in some of their behaviours and attitudes? It happens that we see people heading towards – if not total disaster – certainly negative consequences that they themselves ignore. We can see that they are running the risk of being hurt or disappointed or whatever, while they themselves are happy just to carry on regardless, pursuing the direction they have taken, even though it is leading nowhere.

At one level, we can do absolutely nothing in these circumstances. At another level, we can do something. What we can do is hold these people we love and care for in our prayer, trusting in the Lord for them, pleading with our Heavenly Father to keep watch over them, asking Him to send, what the psalmist calls, the God's *Good Spirit* to lead, guide, protect and deliver them.

I am pretty sure there are some people whom the Lord has placed upon each one of our hearts to pray for; people for whom He has given us, what the psalmist calls, *a marvellous love*. That little line from psalm 15 (psalm 16 in the Hebrew numbering in our Bibles) often comes to my mind in regard to those I believe the Lord has confided to my prayer in a special way. The psalmist prays: *You have put into my heart, O Lord, a marvellous love for these faithful ones who live in the land*. There are certain people who are confided to each one of us so that we may support them, by faithfully, lovingly, carrying them in our prayer of intercession.

Parents live this prayer ministry for their children all the time. I can still hear my late mother say that when she was young and could see her widowed mother seemingly *always praying* and apparently doing so very intently, she once asked her mother why she prayed so much, only to be told that when she herself (that is my mum) would become a mother in her turn, then she would understand, for she would come to realise that the same loving responsibility would be hers.

We can all find ourselves led to intercede for certain people with a really firm commitment, with an intensity, comparable to that of Abraham, where we meet him today, as he pleads with the Lord on his loved ones' behalf. Abraham clearly trusted in God to act. The venerable patriarch had an audacious hope in the Lord whom he asked to be generous and merciful in regard to the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, where his nephew Lot had settled.

I can certainly think of some people who, it seems to me, have really been confided to my prayer by the Lord Himself – and I expect you could all think of such people in your lives too; people you love and care for with a deep human affection and for whom it is given to you to intercede with genuine loving intensity.

The depth of love and concern we hold in our hearts for some people that the Lord places upon our hearts will perhaps always remain somewhat incomprehensible to us; we will simply see it as something we know ourselves to have been called to, by a God-given grace which is also a God-given responsibility. It is as if the Lord not only places certain people upon our hearts, but actually planted them *in* our hearts, asking us to carry them there, within us, not in any possessive way, but in a free and freeing manner.

Reading this morning's first reading, I think of many men and women who have been and are real

intercessors for this world in which we live; men and women who plead before *the Lord's Throne of Mercy* for the Church, of which we are all members; men and women whose lives of prayer have been an inspiration for me. As a community, how can we not think of the late Dom Paul Grammont who in his long night vigils heard and gave echo to what he called *the cry of the world*? I am sure that the prayer support of men and women who are faithful intercessors is a great source of strength for people who are suffering today and that it does much good for them – maybe among these people, we ourselves might be included.

I am also led to think this morning of how important it is for me to remember the call to be faithful in love-inspired prayer myself, in my own life, and, at the same time, to dare to remind all of you, to whom I have been called to preach God's Word, of your responsibility in this domain as well.

As we read this morning's Genesis text – and also the gospel passage heard proclaimed – it seems to me that there is a definite invitation for each one of us to be an intercessor in our turn. I hear a call for all of us to strive to be men and women of compassion; men and women animated by a genuine loving concern and care for others; men and women who think of and hold close to our hearts all our brothers and sisters who are in need.

While the call to intercede in this way is addressed to each one of us, I suspect that some among us sometimes wonder just how to situate ourselves in regard to this ministry. This is what we will look at now for just a moment.

In certain situations it is not at all clear to us how we should position ourselves in regard to people we care for; exactly what it is that we should be asking for them.

Certainly, there are times when we look on and see that we just cannot intervene to change things in loved one's lives and we simply have to accept the fact that we can actually *do* nothing. There are situations when all we can do is respect the free will of those who have gotten into the position (maybe the mess) they are in. We have to realise and accept that can never impose anything upon anyone – even what we might discern to be for that person's greater good. This can lead us into the painful experience of a crucifying helplessness in regard to those we love. At times the only prayer we can offer for those we love and care for is a prayer of personal helplessness.

The story of the father of the two sons comes to mind: that parable referred to as *the Parable of the Prodigal Son* found in chapter 15 of Luke's gospel. The father in the story was called upon to live a real helplessness. No doubt, he carried a concern for his son who was at a distance from him – this is evidenced by the fact that the father saw his son as he returned home when the latter was *still a long way off*. Filled with concern for his son, the father didn't/couldn't go after him and drag him home. He had to respect his son's free will. The gospel text tells us that it was only once the son made the first move, that his father could act as he did: *he ran out to meet the young man* who was heading homeward bound. This shows us that the rejected father didn't stay stuck in his position. He didn't hold himself in a stand-off stance, born of pride, a sense of his own dignity and/or sentiments of self-importance. The father made very definite moves to reach out to the returning son who had cast him off and taken distance from him. The father humbled himself in a bid to restore the son's lost dignity. (This is the meaning of clothing the returned son in the robe, putting a ring on his finger, hosting a feast in the young man's honour.)

There are times in certain relationships – especially relationships in which we have been wounded by people we love – when we may feel a heavy burden to act, but have no idea what to do. All we can do at those times is situate ourselves like the father in the story of the prodigal son: all we can do is remain at our place, holding our hearts open, always longing, ever hoping, for a restoration of the broken relationship... and, when a first move is made by the other, readily go out to meet the one who begins to take whatever small step they have started to take to reconnect with us.

Like Abraham in today's story from Genesis 18, when we are concerned for people's welfare, we

can speak to the Lord about this; we can open our hearts to God *who sees and knows all things*, remembering that He knows those those we are concerned about better than we do, just as He knows each one of us better than we know ourselves.

We can and should trust in the Lord to see through all the complexities and ambiguities of those situations which concern us in others, believing that He sees everything, including all that escapes us, just as He sees through all our own dross, our own complexity and ambiguities.

Abraham wasn't sure what he could do in the situation he faced – or at least was made aware of – in regard to Sodom and Gomorrah. He wasn't even sure that his view of the situation was right. That is often where we find ourselves when we are caught up in difficult situations – in which we find ourselves one step removed, but, nonetheless, somehow implicated, because we know and love the people who are primarily concerned.

Abraham shows us what we can do. The holy patriarch shows us that we can talk with God in a way that helps us reason things out. Abraham shows us that we can put into words all that is going on within us – all those questions, doubts, pain, worries, fears, that are wont to arise within us and which stem from the loving concern we hold tucked in the compassionate corner of our broken hearts.

When we don't know how much of a change we can make or even should make, we can converse with God, as the patriarch did, striving to listen to the Lord, as much as we ask Him to listen to us. In the Abraham-God conversation recorded for us in Genesis 18 we are made privy to an extraordinarily confident and trusting relationship on behalf of both parties. If Abraham is depicted as having a very evident and fully confident trust in His God, the Lord is also shown to have confided and entrusted much to Abraham. The Lord invited the patriarch into a real partnership with Him. This is what the Lord's invitation to us to engage in intercessory prayer seeks to do. By His invitation to us to give ourselves to intercessory prayer, to carry His People on our hearts, the Lord seeks to lead us to become partners/collaborators with Him in His loving care and concern for them. This same point is there in today's gospel passage: Jesus tells us how seriously the Father takes us when we ask, seek and knock. God places Himself at our service, as it were. When we knock, He opens the door.

All in all, the call I hear addressed to us today is a call to reach out to others and to help those who are in need – to be there for all, especially those who may have drifted from God and from us. Remember, Lot – for whom Abraham interceded with such care and so lovingly – was someone who had received (indeed, *taken!*) much from Abraham in the past. Once Lot had gotten on his own feet, he distanced himself from his uncle Abraham, the holy patriarch. Lot went off to do his own thing, winning fame, acclaim, comfort success and wealth for himself without a thought for Abraham to whom he owed so much. Those for whom Abraham interceded so fervently were the descendants of Lot who was someone who always thought of himself first – something he demonstrated this when he chose the rich pasture-land of the valleys, leaving Abraham with the rugged hill country. (This incident is recounted for us in Genesis 13.)

Embracing the easy comforts of the valley's cities, moving in what he esteemed to be *all the right circles*, as we say, Lot had become blind to the legacy he was leaving his descendants. When the men of Sodom demanded that Lot send out his angelic guests to abuse them, Lot offered his daughters as an alternative. This points to Lot's basic weakness. His willingness to do anything, to sacrifice anyone – including those who would certainly have been dear to him – to be accepted in his adopted homeland. Lot's ambition *to be recognised as someone* had led him to fail to treat even his own flesh and blood, the true loves of his life, with the respect, care and consideration they deserved.

It is all the more striking then that, knowing all this, Abraham nonetheless still carried Lot in his heart with a loving concern. Does Abraham's attitude of loving kindness not challenge us to remain

steadfast in love as he, the holy patriarch, did? To remain steadfast in love even when we find ourselves cheated by those we love and care for; even when we find ourselves cast aside by them, hurt and betrayed by them?

The call for all of us today is a call to remain always loving – as Abraham did.

Abraham was able to be steadfast in love because he remained in relationship with God, in prayer. This prayer rooted the patriarch's love and nourished it. It made Abraham capable of being for others what he knew God was for him: gracious and merciful, loving and kind.

Amen!