

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time
(Genesis 18:20-32 / Luke 11:1-13)
28.07.2019

We long for **intimacy** in our lives. We hold in our hearts a deep desire for a sense of belonging. We want to be connected to others. We yearn to live in **relationship**.

Speaking in theological terms we could call all this a need for **communion**.

Whatever words we use to describe this very basic human aspiration, the need to be bonded with others is one that is felt acutely in today's world – which is a world in which so many people are suffering from profound distress, rooted in a pain that stems from their debilitating sense of isolation. It is interesting to note that tackling the problem of loneliness in society was placed high on the agenda of concerns by the United Kingdom government in the past year or so. Researchers consider an engagement in this domain to be essential if we are to deal successfully with people's wide-ranging health issues. Health-care experts believe that giving people a sense of connection to others and helping them to associate with each other will increase their sense of well-being. So many men, women and children – from differing social classes, educational and religious backgrounds – lament that they feel cut off from the world around them. As Church – the *community* of God's People – this must surely concern us. Those suffering from loneliness frequently express their pain in terms of a terrible sense of emptiness that leaves them restless and profoundly disturbed within themselves. What these people long for is what we all desire... and, in a word, that is love.

As human beings, made in God's image and likeness, we have a radical need to be loved and to love, to know and to be known.

I often repeat from this pulpit that one of the challenges before us when we gather to celebrate the liturgy is to bring God's word to bear upon the concrete reality of our lives. So, bearing in mind what I have stated in my words of introduction this morning, let us do just that in regard to today's gospel passage. Let us bring this page of Scripture to bear upon the concrete reality of our lives.

The first thing we should note is that the opening address of the prayer Jesus taught His disciples speaks in terms of our living in **an intimate life-giving, life-receiving relationship, with God**. Jesus would have us pray to God calling Him **Father**. Many ancient sources read *Our Father*, thus reminding us of the importance of our seeing ourselves as intimately related not only to God, but also to each other in the one family of God.

The title *Father* given to the Lord has us acknowledge God to be the source of our life, the One who originally loved us into being and who continues to care for our needs and sustain us, as a parent cares for and sustains their child. It reminds us that the Lord desires for us what parents want to see their offspring enjoy: well-being, happiness and all things good for them.

It is with the conviction that our God holds us in His heart what the psalmist calls *the compassion a father holds for his child* that Jesus invites us to approach the Lord our God in prayer. Elsewhere in his gospel account, Luke has Jesus use a very intimate form of address for the Father in His own prayer to Him. Luke shows us how Jesus called God His *abba*. This appellation is an endearing term which a child might use in speaking to his or her earthly father. The nearest equivalent for us would be *papa* or *daddy*. What I see this intimate form of address implying is that what Jesus wants for us – what we are called to enjoy in prayer – is nothing less than an affectionate familiarity with God. Evidently, it is with the attitude of heart of a trusting child that Jesus would have us approach His Father who is also *our Father*.

The prefix **our** with the title **Father** – which we find in various places in the gospel accounts – shows us that **Jesus would have us share in His very own relationship with God**. We are invited to say *our Father* with Jesus.

However, it is not only with Jesus that we say *our Father*. **We also say *our* with each other in the one family of God.**

In the prayer Christ taught us, it is from the intimate basis of a child to father relationship that Jesus leads us to go on to express our need for such things as discernment, as we seek to tackle the enormous challenges of life; the coming of the kingdom of justice and peace; a readiness to accomplish God's will in all things; the bread we need to feed our hunger; God's grace as we face such difficult, humanly-speaking impossible, issues as forgiveness and reconciliation when our relationships are fractured and broken. Finally, the prayer Jesus would have us pray does not shy away from addressing the problem of evil, having us ask that, with the help of God's grace, we may not go astray, but rather stay on course and walk in the way the Lord would have us follow.

Given the intimate word with which Jesus opens the prayer He taught us, I would like to reflect primarily upon **intimacy in our prayer lives**.

Before going any further, let me state that when I speak of *our prayer lives* I am fully aware that we would be foolish to imagine that *our prayer* can be somehow cut off from the rest of our existence. Prayer should be at the very heart of our lives. It is not an optional additional activity. Prayer should be an integral part of our relationship with God and, indeed, our simply being human.

We have seen that at the heart of what we have called **intimacy** is the experience of really knowing another and being known by that person.

Intimacy involves something else we long for and that is **proximity**.

An *intimate friend* is someone to whom we feel close. We feel a proximity to our friends because they know us at a deep level of our being. They are ready and able to draw near to us at times when we need them. If something goes wrong and damages a relationship of intimacy we are inclined to feel a *distancing* take place between ourself and the one who has been our friend. The level of the relationship changes. It begins to feel superficial.

You will have noted that the images we employ around intimacy are inclined to be spatial, but intimacy is not just (or even primarily) something *spatial*.

Primarily, intimacy is about is about more than physical proximity. **It is relational**.

I really want to emphasise that true intimacy is about genuine **heart to heart encounter**. Indeed, it is still experienced even when there is little or no physical proximity between intimate friends. We all know that we can be sitting beside someone we don't really know and never will know, no matter how close our contact has been at a physical level. Take, for example, a work colleague or a next door neighbour. We may frequent these people often and yet not really know them. Increasingly it is true even when people engage in what have developed into physical sexual relationships they do not really *know* each other. Those involved in casual sexual relationships can fail to enjoy any real *heart to heart encounter*, any real *communication*, with the person with whom they have had *intercourse*, thus belying the very meaning of the term used for *intimate relations*. On the other hand, a person may live on the other side of the world to someone with whom they are intimate, and, while they may only rarely see and have physical contact with that person, they will always feel closely connected with them, united in an intimate bond of communion which leads them to understand that this person is ever close to them.

As we have remarked, Jesus' opening words in the prayer He taught us invite us to enter into Christ's own intimate relationship with His Father.

It is clear that Christ entrusts His Father to us to be our Father. Elsewhere in the gospels – including in the latter section of today's gospel passage.

Jesus insists that trust is fundamental to the relationship with God into which He initiates us.

Christ emphasises that we must dare to trust God. This is hardly surprising, since at the heart of every intimate relationship there will always be a great degree of mutual trust. Again and again –

already in the Old Testament and especially in the psalms (that beautiful collection of prayers of God's People Israel) – the point is made that God is intimate with those who trust Him. The Lord draws close to those who entrust themselves to Him. He makes Himself known to them. He welcomes them as they are. The Lord welcomes all of us to the extent that we dare to make ourselves known to Him, in truth! In other words, not presenting to God a *false self*, but rather daring to be so honest and simple of heart with the Lord that we can appear in His presence just as we are, without guilt or shame. Those who trust in the Lord do not feel the need to camouflage their nakedness. They are able to present themselves before the Lord completely unadorned. They can do this without fear, because of the love they know the Lord holds in His heart in their regard. It is God's *perfect love that casts out their fear*.

The point I believe Jesus would have us grasp by making us echo His own prayer to the Father and having us open up our own dialogue with God, using the same intimate word *Father* He used in His prayer, is that **God also longs for intimacy with each one of us.**

The Lord our God desires to be in relationship with you and with me today – just as we are, with our lives in the state they are in.

We might be a little hesitant to believe this. We would perhaps prefer to be in somewhat better shape, to be purer and more pristine, to have everything in our lives sorted out and in good order, but, God accepts us as we are, in the state we are in. This is because He is our *Father*. A good father always accepts his child as he or she is; a mother does the same. Parents are able to accept their children as they are because they contemplate the fruit of their love when they see their children standing before them – whatever shape and whatever state their children are in. So it is when God looks at us. He sees the fruit of His own love in us.

I will draw this morning's reflection reflection to a close by referring to that most intimate earthly encounter Jesus had with Mary of Magdala in the Easter garden.

I propose that we ponder this gospel scene of Christ's meeting with Mary just after He had risen from the dead. because in it we hear the Risen Christ speak of God once again as *our Father*. You will recall how as Jesus took leave of Mary, who was tempted to cling to Him, He assured her that the One He was going to was not just His God, but her God, not just His Father, but her Father too: *I am going to my God and your God, My Father and your Father*. These words remind us that Jesus shares His intimate relationship with God His Father with all of us. They underline for us, indeed, they seal for us, as it were, what is hinted at in the opening address of the Lord's prayer in which we are invited to pray each day with Jesus, saying: *Our Father*.

What peace, what blessed assurance, we are given to taste when we dare to reflect upon and truly savour the word Jesus would have us speak in prayer when He invites us to echo His own prayer and say with Him: *Father... Our Father*.

Finally, **the hallmark of Jesus' Father, who is *our Father*, is His benevolence towards us.**

This is where the latter part of today's gospel comes in. It shows us something the Scriptures draw to our attention over and over again: the Lord's desire to be gracious to us, His longing to be loving and generous in our regard, His great goodness towards us.

Christ emphasises how God wants to give good gifts to us and not least that good gift of His Spirit.

In the assurance of the Lord's bountiful love, let us present ourselves before Him in this Eucharist so that we may receive here the bread we need for our life journey at this particular moment in time.

What is given to us here at the Holy Table is nothing other than *our daily bread*, the *manna the Lord provides* for our lives at this moment. Let us consent to this gift by simply saying *amen!*