

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)
(Genesis 18:20-32 / Luke 11:1-13)
24.07.2022

One of the graces of my life is to have known Abraham-like figures – persons with compassionate hearts; men and women who have manifested their care and consideration for others... not least by their faithful commitment to intercessory prayer on their behalf. One such person was the abbot who guided me in my early years as a Benedictine monk. In a TV interview shortly before he died, he described something of his prayer of intercession in words characteristic of his simplicity of heart: *There is a communion with the suffering of the world which can be extremely hard to bear at times. One finds oneself, as if in symbiosis with the world ...[and this happens] above all in the prayer of intercession, but also during the recitation of the psalms (the psalms which are a cry of distress and despair, and, yet, at the same time, a call to hope). This also happens in moments of silent prayer – especially during the night hours – when the call to listen to the cry of the world is most intense. When one hears that cry one cannot be indifferent to it. The monk must affront and carry the world's cry in his prayer.* What Abbot Paul Grammont shared with his interviewer reminds me of the spiritual insight of St Silouan of Mount Athos, a 19th century Orthodox monk. In Silouan's *Counsels*, he identifies the monk as *a man who prays and who weeps for the whole world*. He states: *It is the Lord Jesus, the Son of God, who gives a monk the love of the Holy Spirit, and this love fills his heart with tender compassion.*

Of course, monks are not the only people to have hearts full of such compassionate love. I can think of a host of persons whom I have been graced to encounter, who have shown me what it means to be loving and compassionate and to manifest that by suffering with others, carrying them and pleading for them in prayer. I am sure you too can think of such people. And isn't it true that those who have most often impressed us by their compassionate love are those *low profile saints, right there* among our own circle of family and friends, persons who have made an indelible mark upon our lives. We recognise in them a very reflection of God's tender concern for the world, for they have taken that on themselves and made it their own. Their prayer, like that of Abraham, will have been animated by confident trust, unshakable hope and tremendous love. In such persons we will have been given to glimpse or understand something of God's love for all people and for the whole created world. The dimensions of their wide, open hearts can inspire us today to draw closer to the wide and open heart of the Lord Himself, and to be ready to embrace the whole world.

The call addressed to us this morning is not just to admire those we may consider to be saints, or to imitate their example. More than that, we too are called to identify with Christ and in union with Christ to radiate God's tremendous love for all the world – by our prayer for others.

In today's first reading, we meet Abraham who shows forth what this involves: walking and talking with God and along the way, as we converse with Him, pleading for those whom we recognise to be in special need of His mercy. What we see here in Genesis 18 amounts to nothing less than the Patriarch, Abraham collaborating with God as God's partner! That is essentially what the prayer of intercession draws us into: partnership with the Lord! Through the prayer of intercession we are given to *carry God's People upon our hearts*, to use that beautiful phrase of Michael Ramsey, the late Archbishop of Canterbury. When we take on the ministry of intercessory prayer seriously, we enter into Christ's High Priestly Prayer. We become one with Christ in His love for the world... a love that led Him to give His life for all. Elsewhere in the New Testament we hear how *Jesus made his prayers and intercessions with loud cries and silent tears to God who could save him from death, and how he submitted so*

humbly that His prayer was heard (Heb. 5:7). So too, we can be one with Christ in an intercession where no one will be excluded from our consideration, no one excluded from our prayer.

It is striking how a little earlier in the Abraham story we have listened to, he was pleading for the descendants of Lot. True these were Abraham's own kith and kin. But, more to the point, these descendants of Lot were family members who had become somewhat estranged from Abraham. These had kept their distance from him in rivalry and even enmity.

Let's refresh our memories. Back in chapter 13 of the Book of Genesis, we see how Lot separated from Abraham, taking for himself the most fertile pasture land of the valleys, leaving Abraham with the poorer rugged hill-country, with no second thought. Despite this, Abraham still carried Lot upon his heart in prayer.

This leads us to understand that Abraham's concern and prayer for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah were a revelation of God's *steadfast, merciful love* at work in his heart. It was the Lord Himself who led Abraham to plead with Him that clemency be extended to the sinful /wicked people of Sodom and Gomorrah.

This morning we heard that this same Abraham "*walked with the Lord*". And as they walked together, they conversed. This detail underlines for us that Abraham's compassion expressed in his prayer was rooted in and stemmed from his relationship with God. Like Abraham, we are called to *walk in humble fellowship with the Lord*, conversing with Him in prayer... pleading our concerns for others, including those who may have cheated or betrayed us along the way.

And did not Jesus keep insisting that His followers should pray for those who do them wrong. His way is that *we love our enemies and pray for them...* to invoke God's blessing and forgiveness on them.

And so, we can return to Saint Silouan and take inspiration from his example of prayer *for those who hurt or pained him; his enemies*. He declared: *We should love our enemies, feel with them and for them, suffer with them and for them, as if they were our own children. For, this is what the Lord Himself does and teaches us to do.*

Yet another echo of Jesus's response to the disciples who asked Him to show them how to pray... He taught them to plead: *Father, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who have sinned against us.*

May the reach of our prayer make manifest our love for all, including those who may have wronged and offended us, that we may all be delivered from evil. Amen.