

HOMILY SUNDAY 17 – C

“Live Prayerfully in Christ”

(Genesis 18:20-21, 23-32; Psalm 138; Col 2:6-14; Luke 11:1-13)

A Sunday school teacher was discussing the Ten Commandments with five and six year olds. He explained the commandment to “honor thy father and thy mother,” then asked “Is there a commandment that teaches us how to treat our brothers and sisters?” Without missing a beat one little boy answered, “Thou shall not kill.”

Live prayerfully in Christ

The readings today centre on the theme of prayer. In the first reading, Abraham is pictured in prayerful dialogue with God, interceding for others. St. Paul in the second reading encourages us to live our lives in Christ, rooted in him, built up in him. And in the gospel, Jesus teaches the disciples how to pray, the importance of prayer, what to pray for, and to be persistent in prayer

The gospel passage is from Luke, who changes the metaphorical language of Matthew (“debts”) to theological language (“sins”). Forgiveness was one of the expected blessings of the day of salvation. As surely and desperately as we need bread, we need forgiveness. Jewish teachings had already linked the necessity of forgiving others to one’s ability to receive forgiveness. One who will not forgive cannot receive forgiveness; mercy flows through the same channel, whether being given or received.

The assurances given in these sayings assume that the petitioner, the seeker, and the knocker are seeking God’s kingdom and are praying in the posture of one who prays the model prayer. Luke signals the fulfilment of these assurances by repeating the verb “to open” three times in reference to the risen Lord’s activities; He opened the eye of the disciples, he opened the Scriptures to them, and he opened their minds to understand. If human fathers give good things, the heavenly Father will give the Holy Spirit – the greatest gift – to those who ask. Luke breaks Matthew’s parallelism in order to foreshadow the giving of the Holy Spirit and its work in the early church.

The assurances that follow the Lord’s Prayer assume that those who ask, seek and knock are asking from their need and for God’s will, seeking the kingdom, and knocking at the door as a neighbor in the night. Jesus’ teachings on prayer require that the one who prays will pray as one aware of desperate self-need before God. Jesus’ teachings assure us that prayer is effective not because of our cajoling, or because we have found the right words, but because of God’s nature as a Father who loves his own and who wants to give to those in need. Both the model prayer and parables elsewhere in the Gospel underscore the related point that prayer is ultimately the worship of God as Father acknowledging God’s holiness and devoting ourselves to the coming of God’s kingdom. Where we bring our need to God’s love in faith, is prayer.

A prerequisite to effective prayer is the desire to let go of sin and sinfulness. St. Paul speaks of being “circumcised with a spiritual circumcision.” Baptism means a real death; when we die physically we can no longer sin; baptism means that we undergo a spiritual death to sin now - a real letting go of addiction, selfishness and false pride, a real change in our lives. God has forgiven us all our trespasses; we must believe this and receive that forgiveness.

After Dianne was diagnosed with cancer, she gave up smoking and drinking, her two addictions, and finally completed her long delayed Step four of the Twelve Step program, a searching and fearless moral inventory. She then cleaned house by celebrating Step Five, admitting to God, her self and another human being, the exact nature of her wrongs, which for her was a general confession. Months later, she was able to die in peace, reconciled with her family. Those last months of her life were truly lived prayerfully in Christ.

Over the years I have gathered many articles and items on prayer. One of them is the following reflection on the “Our Father”:

I cannot pray "OUR" if my faith has no room for others and their need.

I cannot pray "FATHER" if I do not demonstrate this relationship to God in my daily living.

I cannot pray "WHO ART IN HEAVEN" if all of my interests and pursuits are only in earthly things.

I cannot pray "HALLOWED BE THY NAME" if I am not striving for God's help to be holy.

I cannot pray "THY KINGDOM COME" if I am unwilling to accept God's rule in my life.

I cannot pray "THY WILL BE DONE" if I am unwilling or resentful of having it realized in my life.

I cannot pray "ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN" unless I am truly ready to give myself to God's service here and now.

I cannot pray "GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD" without expending honest effort for it or if I would withhold from my neighbor the bread I receive.

I cannot pray "FORGIVE US OUR TRESPASSES AS WE FORGIVE THOSE WHO TRESPASS AGAINST US" if I continue to harbor a grudge against anyone.

I cannot pray "LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION" if I deliberately choose to remain in a situation where I am likely to be tempted.

I cannot pray "DELIVER US FROM EVIL" if I am not prepared to resist evil with my life and my prayer.

I cannot pray "THINE IS THE KINGDOM" if I am unwilling to obey the King. I cannot pray "THINE IS THE POWER AND THE GLORY" if I am seeking power for myself and my own glory first.

I cannot pray "FOREVER AND EVER" if I am too anxious about each day's affairs. I cannot pray "AMEN" unless I can honestly say "Not MY will, but Thy will be done," so let Thy will be done in my life.

Renowned preacher Fr. Basil Pennington had breakfast with Mr. Theresa of Calcutta one day. He asked her for a word of wisdom. She was quiet for a moment, then said, "Pray that I don't get in the way of God's will."

The greatest prayer we have as a Catholic Church, the Eucharist, includes the "Our Father" as a central part. It is our family prayer at the family table. It is especially in the Eucharist that we discern "real presence" – God's ultimate answer to our prayer. As we unite ourselves with the sacrifice of Christ in the liturgy, we know for certain that our prayer is heard and answered. The Eucharist makes present for us the love of God given to us by Jesus on the cross, and empowers us to live in Him, and to live out the Our Father in our lives.

So let us live prayerfully in Christ, and with hearts full of faith and hope, answer "Amen."