

17th Sunday, Year C; Gen. 18:20-32; Col 2:12-14; Luke 11:1-13

The most important issue of our times is how to overcome evil without doing further evil in the process. Abraham in his plea with God demonstrates to us that evil cannot be overcome by evil. It can only be overcome by good.

Homily

Prayer forms the subject of both the first reading and the Gospel. Prayer is a favorite theme of Luke. In the first reading, we see Abraham interceding with God on behalf of Sodom, a city full of evil. Troubled by the idea of the innocent being punished along with the guilty, he bargained with God. The story highlights the importance of intercessory prayers and reveals the nature of God's loving mercy and attentiveness to our prayers. Jesus urges us to go on asking for what we need with persistence, doggedness and confidence.

The picture of Abraham pleading with God to save Sodom and Gomorrah is a fascinating one. The idea that comes across is that God will not punish a multitude of wicked people if it means punishing a handful of just people at the same time. We go to the opposite extreme. We are quite willing to punish a multitude of innocent people as long as a few guilty ones get punished as well. To take a few examples:

When Governments and soldiers fight Guerilla warfare, they often think nothing of wiping out whole villages of men and women and children, provided that they can get rid of a few guerilla and enemy combatants. It happened in Vietnam, in Argentina [during the so called dirty war], in Iraq, in Israeli-Hesbollah war. Sometimes they even wipe out innocent civilians just for the fun of killing. This happened in the genocidal Nigerian civil War. The Nigerian soldiers killed millions of innocent and defenceless Biafrans, the Boko Haram in their suicide and murderous raids killed innocent and unsuspecting Christians and Igbos.

We tend to make people scapegoats of sad and bitter experiences. There was a lovely lady who was going through the agony and trauma of her divorce and having to fend for her family all alone. She was overwhelmed by the enormity of the family responsibility that she had to shoulder all alone. One day she as she drove her two children home from school, her sadness resurfaced and dogged her. She suddenly pulled over, leaned on her seat towards the two children and gave the younger one a hard full slap on the face. As the child screamed, she said "it was just to keep your father that I had you, now see the mess that I have found myself into". It was a sad experience whose bitterness stayed with the boy until he was in his forties when he decided to forgive his mother. Misplaced and collective punishment can create such a bitterness and sorrow for the victims. A good prayer life. A good bargain in prayer frees us and heals our hurts. However, it is good to note that habit dies hard. Some

people remain ever the same, unchangeable, unbendable and unforgiving, as hard as a wall and the brick behind it. Human nature is hard to beat.

Once upon a time, the King of the Cats made a pilgrimage to the Holyland. On his return, the king of the Mouse felt obliged to go and congratulate him. But when the other mouse who were his subjects heard this, they feared for the safety of their King. The Cat is our enemy, he can't be trusted, they said. The King of the Mouse reasoned that now that the he has been to the Holyland, he [the King of the Cat] would sure be a changed man. He said he learnt that the King prays five times a day and attends religious activities regularly. So the King mouse set out. On entering the kingdom of the Cats, he spotted their King from a distance. He was pleased with what he saw. The King Cat was still vested in his pilgrim's robe and was devoutly praying. However, no sooner had the king mouse come closer to him, he jumped up and pounced. Fortunately the king mouse was a fast mover, and succeeded in escaping down a hole. Later in the night, he rejoined his subjects where they were gathered to welcome him back. How did you get on? they asked eagerly. Is it true that since he made this pilgrimage to the Holy land, he is now a changed person? The king mouse replied, I am afraid you were right. Though he dresses and prays like a pilgrim, he still jumps and pounces like a Cat. When we apply this story to ourselves, we see how easy it is to separate the two commandments, to think that we can have one and not the other, that we can love and serve God without loving and serving our neighbours. Frederick Nietzsche once said, if these Christians want me to believe in their redeemer, why don't they look a little bit redeemed themselves. If we allow ritual and cult to take the place of love, we end up having a sterile and loveless religion and that is far from Jesus' wish. Our sin sometimes is that we either are not interested in or even don't even know who our neighbours are in the first place. The worst thing of all is cold indifference. The bible tells us to love everybody, our enemies as well as our friends. G.K Chesterton argued that the reason for this is that they are often one and the same people.

All of us have the capacity for love but we seldom use them. The Actor, Christopher Reeve, was famous for his portrayal of the superman in the movies. However, as a result of his fall from a horse, he ended up in wheel chair, paralysed from neck down. He said he got 100,000 letters of sympathy and support from people. This led him to ask: why does it take a tragedy before we can show appreciation and affirmation to one another.