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Prayer in the Life of Jesus and the Church

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Prayer in the Life of Jesus and the Church

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Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 28, 2013 Sunday Readings for Cycle C:

Gn 18:20-32; Ps 138; Col 2:12-14; Lk 11:1-13

PRAYER IN THE LIFE OF JESUS AND THE CHURCH

Lawrence E. Frizzell

The riches of the Christian life are explored through the selection of biblical readings for the Sunday liturgy. Prayer is the breath of this life, which is grounded in the gracious presence of God. Just as we take breathing for granted until an allergy or ailment strikes, so many Christians fail to deepen their understanding of prayer until a dramatic need arises. Then, of course, prayer becomes an urgent petition for *my* needs. Rather self-centered and childish, are we not?

The framework for all prayer must be twofold: adoration whereby we acknowledge that God is at the core of our existence and thanksgiving-and-praise for the gifts we have received already. Both of these dimensions of prayer are foremost in the Gospel, shown in the intimate communion of Jesus with the Father and in the blessing (*eucharist*) of public worship in Temple and synagogue, reaching its apex in the Lord's Supper. When the faithful foster personal intimacy with God as a preparation for the community experience of the sacraments, then the prayers of contrition and petition will be balanced and proportionate.

The example of Abraham shows that a life of prayer begins by listening to God's Word, enabling each person to ascertain his or her vocation. Thus did the elderly couple, Abraham and Sarah, embark on a journey of faith. After God had manifested to them that they would be blessed with a son (Gn 18:9-15), Abraham learned that Sodom and Gomorrah were to be scrutinized and judged. As one would haggle in the market, the patriarch began to plead with God on behalf of his neighbors. Would the innocent perish with the sinners? He boldly challenged God: "Should not the Judge of the whole world act with justice?" (Gn 18:25). When faced with personal tragedy, people often question divine justice and blame God for their trials. But does this become part of our prayer? That would mean listening for a divine word to place the charge into perspective. Awe before the wondrous majesty of God led Abraham to acknowledge his creaturehood: "I am but dust and ashes!" (Gn 18:27). As we pray in Christian faith we explicitly ask that the heavenly Father look to the infinite merits of Christ, the basis for the forgiveness of our sins.

Following the example of Abraham, Jewish teachers emphasize that petition should be communal, especially intercession for others and relating our own "needs" to the capacity for service of God and neighbor. Otherwise, our pleas for help can be very self-centered.

St. Luke composed a Gospel of prayer, preserving beautiful canticles of praise and thanksgiving (1:46-55, 68-79; 2:14, 29-32) which became part of the Church's daily worship, followed by an insistence on the importance of prayer for Jesus himself. At every important step in this public ministry of Jesus, Luke notes that he was in intimate communion with the Father (3:21-23; 6:12-16; 9:18-21; 10:21-22; 11:1-14; 22:31-34, 39-46; 23:34, 46).

Inspired by this example, the disciples asked Jesus: "Lord, teach us to pray..." (Lk 11:1). They already knew that the blessing (thanks-and-praise) is central to community and personal prayer, so Jesus focused on intimacy with the heavenly Father. He presented a series of petitions that place the person (Name) and cause of God foremost in our lives. Then needs of our daily existence are linked to a pattern of pardon as the basis for our relationship with others. That the trials of life not overwhelm us either now or on the last day inspires a call for divine mercy.

Is this merely a short version of the Lord's prayer used in the liturgy (Mt 6:9-13) or is it an independent example of a brief prayer for travelers? In either case, this is a precious record of the way Jesus insisted that petitions must be ordered to the service of God in a community.

St. Luke then recalls an example of how Jesus insisted on perseverance in prayer of intercession. This serves at least two purposes; we intensify our sense of dependence on God and show a continuing concern for our neighbor in a time of need. Thus do we move from the self-centered attitude that inhibits our growth as a person and as a Christian. Throughout the Gospel, St. Luke stresses the role of the Holy Spirit in the divine plan and to the life of each Christian. Even within the limits of human nature, parents try to offer good things for their children. "How much more will the heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him!" (Mt 7:11). Luke specifies that the greatest divine gift is the Holy Spirit (11:13). Perhaps he learned this from St. Paul who wrote: "The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit intercedes for us in sighs too deep for words...(Rom 8:26).