

For the Sake of the Righteous

In the name of him who teaches us to pray, dear friends in Christ: Good news and bad news seem to constant companions. Wherever there's one, you can count on the other being there too. That's the case in today's Old Testament lesson. The Lord has come down in person to deliver the good news to Abraham and Sarah that after all the long years of waiting, the time had come for him to fulfill his word to give the aged couple the child he had promised – the son through whom he, the Lord, would fulfill all the promises he made to Abraham: to bless him, to make of him a great nation, and ultimately, through his line, to bring the Savior into the world. That's good news indeed – for all of us.

But then we hear the bad news: the Lord has come down also in judgment. The situation in the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah has become so repugnant to the Lord that he who is ever inclined to longsuffering mercy toward sinners has decided that he must take action. The sins of these cities' citizens are so vile that the cries of their wounded victims have reached his ears. He has determined that the time has come for the hammer of his justice to fall. He tells Abraham that he's come down to investigate the situation in person to see if it's as bad as he's heard. He says this for Abraham's benefit. He, of course, already knows.

It is the Lord's announcing of his intent that opens the door for Abraham to offer up what is the Bible's first example of an intercessory prayer; that is, an appeal made by a faithful person on behalf of someone else (or, in this case, on behalf of many other people). While the two angels who have accompanied the Lord go on ahead to scout out the cities, the Lord himself remains behind to hear Abraham's prayer.

We can learn a few things from the way Abraham makes his appeal. First, note his deference and humility. Abraham understands his place in the universe. Here he is, a lowly sinner, a man of "dust and ashes", addressing the Lord God of all creation. In today's Gospel reading, Jesus invites his disciples to address the Lord in familiar terms as "Our Father". We sometimes lose the sense of what a great privilege that is. If you want to meet with the state governor or somebody like that, you probably have to make an appointment months in advance, and only then if whoever sets their schedule decides you're important enough to be granted a couple of minutes. But the Lord God himself – the absolute top of the chain of command – makes himself available 24/7 to your every request. And when you begin to speak, he's all ears giving you his undivided attention and being actually delighted in you for displaying the faith to bring your concerns to him. It's astounding. Abraham approaches the Lord in an almost apologetic way, like "I know I have no place asking this" – which is true; but it's equally true that the Lord loves to hear and answer the prayers of his people.

The second thing to note is the basis of Abraham's appeal to the Lord for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Yes, the people of those cities are extremely wicked. Yes, they shouldn't be allowed to continue to inflict injuries on their victims. And yes, they richly deserve to be punished for their crimes. But Abraham knows that at least a handful of the people living in them (his nephew Lot for one) can be counted among the righteous; righteous by faith, that is. Though sinners in a moral sense, they do trust in the Word and promises of God just as Abraham does – Abraham whom the Lord counts righteous by faith. Abraham appeals to the Lord for their sake. It would not be right, he says, for the Lord to sweep away the righteous with the wicked. To do so would lay the Lord open to the charge of being unjust.

That's true; and the Lord readily concedes the point. If there are 50 righteous people found among them, I won't destroy them. Abraham goes into negotiation mode. What about 45? Or thirty? Twenty? Ten? Each time the Lord agrees. I will spare the wicked for the sake of the righteous. I imagine that at ten Abraham felt that he had pushed the argument as far as he could, and further that his intercession had successfully saved the cities. Surely, he thought, there are at least ten righteous people to be found in them.

Turns out that Abraham was wrong on both counts. But before we get there, I want to point out the glaring flaw in Abraham's argument. He claims that it would be unjust to destroy the righteous with the wicked. It would be wrong to treat them the same. But by not destroying the wicked that's exactly what the Lord would end up doing: he'd be treating the wicked the same as the righteous. And that isn't just or right either. *But it is what the Lord does.* He does not treat people as their sins deserve. He is inclined toward mercy and forgiveness – more so inclined than Abraham would have guessed.

This is the very heart of the Gospel: the Lord spares the wicked for the sake of the righteous, not ten but ... *One*. The Lord Jesus Christ is that righteous One. It's only on his account that anyone, any wicked sinner, is saved. And what Abraham did for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah is what Jesus does for us. He intercedes on our behalf: "Father, forgive them for they don't know what they're doing." He pleads his own righteousness in our defense. "Spare them for my sake – not because of what they have done, but because of what I have done for them."

And no, that isn't just. The wicked deserve to be punished. It would be unjust not to punish them. But there is something greater than God's justice: it's his love. And so in love God gave his Son, the righteous One, to satisfy his justice; to bear the penalty of all sins as if he were the only sinner so that we who are sinful can be counted righteous by faith in him.

But I want to expand on this idea. The Lord does all things for the sake of the righteous One. If we ask why the sun comes up in the morning, why the world goes on, why we have food and drink, house and home, family and friends, the answer is always the same: it's for the sake of the righteous One, Jesus Christ. He is the only reason that God shows mercy to the sinful world. It's because of the intercession he makes on our behalf.

And now take it a step farther: because by faith in Christ we are righteous in God's sight, it can be said that the Lord is doing all things for our sakes too. Again, we ask, why does the world go on? Why has the Lord not yet brought his judgment upon the wicked? For the sake of the righteous – both we who are righteous by faith and those who are yet in their sins but who will come to faith in Christ and be saved. And because we are righteous in God's sight, we too can intercede on behalf of others and for ourselves. Our prayers are pleasing to the Lord for the sake of the righteous One. Therefore let us pray in confidence knowing that for his sake we are heard, and that our heavenly Father who knows how to give good gifts to his children will grant to us all things needful for this life and the next. Let us pray especially that the Lord will give us his Holy Spirit that our faith in Christ may grow and mature, and that our love may abound. And let us intercede also for those who are yet outside the family of faith that they may come to know these glorious truths in which we stand and are saved, that they too may be counted righteous for the sake of the righteous One. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!