

Luke is the evangelist who is most concerned with prayer. He tells us that Jesus prays before the most important moments of his ministry. Jesus is praying when the Spirit descends on him after his baptism; he prays before he chooses his disciples; ...; and of course, as he goes towards his death, he prays on the Mount of Olives.

It is appropriate then that Luke has Jesus give an instruction on prayer. Luke's audience is made up mostly of Gentile Christians. They would have no background of prayer and so he has to give basic instruction. This is significantly different to Matthew who is writing predominantly for Jewish Christians who are highly knowledgeable about how to pray.

This perhaps explains why there is a difference between the Our Father as handed down by Matthew and that, as we heard today, passed on by Luke. Scholars tell us that Luke probably gives us something closer to the original as taught by Jesus in terms of length - the number of petitions. Matthew or his Jewish community who are familiar with prayers and praying, have rounded out the petitions and given suitable elaboration to give the prayer appropriate liturgical style. The success of their endeavour is seen in the fact that Matthew's version is the one that is known to everyone; and few, outside the rarefied world of Scripture scholarship, would know that there was a second version and certainly would not be able to recite it. Luke's shorter prayer is set in a catechesis about prayer

The message of the first reading and the Gospel today appears to be: "Persist in prayer" or "storm the gates of heaven" as my old granny used to say. But I am not so sure. That is a good and important message, no doubt, but I am not sure it is what the sacred authors of these two passages had in mind. If God is *Abba*, a loving Father, then what sort of loving daddy will not respond immediately to his child's necessary request but will keep toying with them; responding only when he's satisfied they've knocked enough, pleaded enough, gone through enough heart-ache. That does not ring true for me. We have been bewitched by a mistranslation. The concern of our readings is not about us; it is about the nature of God and God being true to Godself.

Abraham in the Genesis-passage goes back to God again and again to whittle down the number of just men whose presence in Sodom will save it from destruction. Fifty is thus reduced to ten. But in fact there are no good men in the town - as God would know, being as God is all-knowing. So here we have a message which is less about persistence, noteworthy as that is, and more about God's justice. He would relent if there was a single good man to be found (as he had protected Noah) but as there was no good man to be found Sodom, proverbial for its wickedness, is nuked. Contrast the way God relents in the story of Jonah when the people of equally wicked Nineveh repent in sackcloth and ashes, from the great king to every Buttercup the cow and Tiddles the cat, when Jonah preaches at them. God's mercy drives Jonah crazy. And there we have the point: God is both just and merciful.

In the Gospel the parable of the neighbour appears to say ask persistently and you'll

get what you need. The word "persistence" is there in the story, isn't it?

Let's look first at what follows the parable. Jesus compares the acts of a normal father with a sadist of a parent. What father gives his child a stone instead of bread? (A bread roll can look a bit rock-like); or gives a snake, potentially fatal and certainly a nasty shock, when you expecting a fish (Think eel, for the comparison); or a scorpion which gives a vicious sting when an egg has been requested. (I'm told a curled up scorpion can resemble an egg but I have never seen one). The answer in each case is that no father does such a thing; It just doesn't happen. So God who is *Abba* won't act that way either.

The same method is being used in the parable. What neighbour acts in such a selfish way? The answer in this Near Eastern society is no neighbour ever acts like that. In this culture, then as today, hospitality is a solemn obligation that is never shirked.

This duty of hospitality is one which falls on the whole village. The unexpected guest will stay at one house but what is required for their comfort will be gathered from all the houses that can help out. Every courtesy must be afforded him - a wash, a meal, a bed. The host will know where the freshest bread is and will go and beg the three loaves that are needed: one for the guest, one for the host and one to show that there is an abundance for the visitor. The bread is essential for the meal as it is plate and cutlery and napkin. The food is scooped from the common dishes with the bread which is used to wipe hands and mouth and discarded for the dogs, an image we see in other parables. Everything will be gathered in the same way and it will be given without demur. The honour of the entire village is at stake.

Were anyone to give the feeble excuses that we hear in the story, rather like saying I can't find my slippers and my lumbago is acting up, then he would be shunned for years to come. Memories are long. His life would be a misery of loneliness and silence. When he needed help it would not appear. No, the story is a parody. Such things do not happen. And it is not persistence on behalf of the needy neighbour which secures his needs for his guest, that is a possible translation of the world used in Greek, but it does not work well in this context or in the structure of the story. It is honour and its counterpoint shame on the part of the sleeping one which secures all that is wanted.

Father's do not give stones to their hungry children, that would soon be known in the community and the father would be shamed; And our heavenly *Abba* does not give his children anything but good things or he would be shamed. God must be true to his nature as just and merciful and full of love. Notice, there is no repetition of knocking or asking in the passage. It does not say keep knocking, keep asking. We imagine that, under the influence of the erroneously perceived persistence of the needy neighbour. God does not need to be asked twice; though he will give only what is for our ultimate good, in accordance with his will. Jesus' teaching about prayer is the prayer we hear on the Mount of Olives before his arrest: "Not mine but Thy will be done".