

SEVENTEENTH  
SUNDAY IN  
ORDINARY TIME

YEAR C



**Prayer**

*Psalm 138:1-3, 6-8*

I give you thanks, O Lord,  
with my whole heart; before  
the gods I sing your praise;  
I bow down toward your  
holy temple and give thanks  
to your name for your  
steadfast love and your  
faithfulness; for you have  
exalted your name and your  
word above everything.

On the day I called, you  
answered me, you increased  
my strength of soul.  
For though the Lord is high,  
he regards the lowly;  
but the haughty he perceives  
from far away.

Though I walk in the midst  
of trouble, you preserve  
me against the wrath of my  
enemies; you stretch out  
your hand, and your right  
hand delivers me.

The Lord will fulfill his  
purpose for me; your  
steadfast love, O Lord,  
endures forever.  
Do not forsake the work of  
your hands.

**Reading the Word**

*First Reading: Genesis 18:20-32*

Then the Lord said, "How great  
is the outcry against Sodom and  
Gomorrah and how very grave  
their sin! I must go down and  
see whether they have done  
altogether according to the

outcry that has come to me;  
and if not, I will know."

So the men turned from there,  
and went toward Sodom, while  
Abraham remained standing  
before the Lord. Then Abraham  
came near and said, "Will you  
indeed sweep away the right-  
eous with the wicked? Suppose  
there are fifty righteous within  
the city; will you then sweep  
away the place and not forgive  
it for the fifty righteous who  
are in it? Far be it from you  
to do such a thing, to slay the  
righteous with the wicked, so  
that the righteous fare as the  
wicked! Far be that from you!  
Shall not the Judge of all the  
earth do what is just?" And the  
Lord said, "If I find at Sodom fifty  
righteous in the city, I will for-  
give the whole place for their  
sake." Abraham answered, "Let  
me take it upon myself to speak  
to the Lord, I who am but dust  
and ashes. Suppose five of the  
fifty righteous are lacking? Will  
you destroy the whole city for  
lack of five?" And he said, "I will  
not destroy it if I find forty-five  
there." Again he spoke to him,  
"Suppose forty are found there."  
He answered, "For the sake of  
forty I will not do it." Then he  
said, "Oh do not let the Lord be  
angry if I speak. Suppose thirty  
are found there." He answered,  
"I will not do it, if I find thirty  
there." He said, "Let me take  
it upon myself to speak to the

FIRST READING

Genesis 18:20-32

PSALM

Psalm 138:1-3, 6-8

SECOND READING

Colossians 2:12-14

GOSPEL

Luke 11:1-13

Lord. Suppose twenty are found  
there." He answered, "For the  
sake of twenty I will not destroy  
it." Then he said, "Oh do not let  
the Lord be angry if I speak just  
once more. Suppose ten are  
found there."

He answered, "For the sake of  
ten I will not destroy it."

*Second Reading:*

*Colossians 2:12-14*

When you were buried with  
Christ in baptism, you were also  
raised with him through faith in  
the power of God, who raised  
him from the dead. And when  
you were dead in trespasses and  
the uncircumcision of your flesh,  
God made you alive together  
with him, when he forgave us  
all our trespasses, erasing the  
record that stood against us  
with its legal demands. He set  
this aside, nailing it to the cross.

*Gospel: Luke 11:1-13*

He was praying in a certain  
place, and after he had finished,  
one of his disciples said to him,  
"Lord, teach us to pray, as John  
taught his disciples." He said to  
them, "When you pray, say:  
Father, hallowed be your name.  
Your kingdom come.  
Give us each day our daily  
bread.

And forgive us our sins,  
for we ourselves forgive ev-  
eryone indebted to us.  
And do not bring us to the  
time of trial."

And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

"So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

*Scripture quotations from  
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## Hearing the Word

### *"Grace amidst Wickedness"*

Today's readings do not conceal the fact that evil and wickedness are powerfully present and active in the world. However, God's grace still operates in their midst, protecting and preserving those who draw upon it through prayer.

The first reading continues the story of the encounter between

Abraham and God from last Sunday. However, the conversation now turns to a different topic. The inhabitants of the nearby cities, Sodom and Gomorrah, engaged in practices that violated all standards of morality and justice. God decided to act against these sinful cities and made his intentions known to Abraham (Gen 18:19). God's decision created a great dilemma for Abraham. Abraham knew that there were at least a few individuals in those cities who lived righteous lives. His nephew, Lot, was among them. If the cities were destroyed and the righteous Lot with them, it would put God's justice for the righteous into question. But if the wicked are left to thrive and the guilty escape punishment, then God's justice would likewise be challenged. The core of the problem here is whether righteousness can counterbalance wickedness, and if so, to what degree. Thus, Abraham begins his dialogue with the Lord inquiring about the number of the righteous needed to counterbalance the wicked majority. His logic is, that if the guilt of the wicked can affect the righteous, then perhaps the innocence of the righteous can save the wicked.

He begins with the high number of fifty, to which God responds that fifty righteous would be enough to spare the city. The same answer is given to five more inquiries as Lot eventually brings the number down to ten. In the Israelite tradition, ten is the minimum number of members needed to constitute a community. Thus, Abraham's bargaining with God reveals that God is willing to forego punishment if even the small-

est community of the righteous can be found among the large population of the wicked. God's grace and forgiveness are not dependant on numbers, or limited by wickedness. Grace operates wherever righteousness in present even in the smallest measure.

The second reading describes the triumph of God over the sinfulness and wickedness of the Colossian Christians. Without any reservations Paul describes the Colossians prior to their conversion as "dead" and "uncircumcised". These are very unflattering terms, pointing to lives of ignorance and moral depravity. Without the knowledge of God and the ethical guidance of his commandments, they were alienated from God with no hope of redemption. However, God intervened in their lives through Christ. First, because of the apostolic proclamation of Paul they were "buried with Christ" in baptism. Burial symbolically refers to the immersion in the waters of baptism and the resulting dying to the old life. The new life comes as rising from the dead through faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus died a physical death on the cross, so that the Colossians can die with him a symbolic death to a life of sin and unbelief. Jesus was then raised from the dead, so that the Colossians can rise to a renewed spiritual life of righteousness and faith. The new life comes to them through identification with Christ, which is ritually confirmed in baptism.

Because of baptism and faith, the Colossians had their sins and trespasses forgiven – their "debt" has been "nailed to the cross". This beautiful symbolic statement means that their transgressions and ignorance

remained nailed to the symbol of death – the cross – while they themselves were removed from the cross and rose to new life together with Christ. The key in this reading is the emphasis on God's initiative, and his power behind this process. God brought these former Gentiles to faith in Christ, while they were still dead in their trespass. God's intervention preceded their conversion. The Colossians' story proves that God's mercy and salvific initiative does not cease, even in the midst of human unrighteousness.

The gospel passage features three distinct parts joined by the common theme of prayer. The first part contains the famous prayer of Jesus which he taught his disciples as a pattern for all prayer. This pattern is reflected in the five petitions that this prayer consists of. The first two arise out the need for God's presence and intervention in this godless world. The petition that God's name be "hallowed", that is "made holy", requests the manifestation of God's presence and holiness before a world which does not know or which rejects God. Combined with the second petition for the coming of God's kingdom, this first part of the prayer expresses the longing of believers for God's rule to take over the world and for the end to the chaos and wickedness that envelops it at the present.

The third petition is a request for daily bread. This is the plea of those experiencing economic insecurity, and who rely on God for their daily provision of food. The fourth petition pleads for the forgiveness of sins, but makes it conditional on mutual forgiveness. Praying with these words, those who ask for

God's forgiveness oblige themselves to forgive others.

The final petition requests God's protection from the trials and temptations that may lead to the loss of faith. The proper translation of this petition should read, "do not allow us to enter into temptation". This petition acknowledges that believers are exposed to temptations to sin and to apostasy. Therefore, this is a plea to God to save believers from such situations where their faith would be challenged beyond measure. This is a prayer for the preservation of faith which is exposed to the challenges and trials brought by the evil and wickedness operating in this world.

The second and third part of our passage highlight the need for perseverance in prayer. In the story of a reluctant friend the petitioner receives the bread he requested, because his persistence overcame obstacles that the circumstances posed. Then, the threefold exhortation to ask, seek and knock teaches that the prayers must first be made before they are answered. God responds to the petitioners who are determined, and know what to ask for. However, the supreme gift of God that petitioners ought to seek is the Holy Spirit, who alone is God's greatest gift. Through the Holy Spirit, God's grace and mercy come to the believers, in response to their prayers, in all the challenging circumstances of life.

The three reading of today disclose that God's grace operates even in the midst of the wickedness and unrighteousness that affects the world and believers. God was willing to hold off his judgement over the wicked cities because of even few righteous who lived there. God did

not overlook the Colossians even when they were far from him, living in wickedness and ignorance. Rather, God sent them Paul, with the proclamation of Jesus Christ, and this brought them to faith, and saved them. Jesus teaches his disciples the various aspects of prayer, knowing that through prayer they can draw upon God's grace in every situation. Because of the prayer that brings them God's grace even as they face wickedness, believers can say with the Psalmist, "though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies."

### **Listening to the Word of God**

In his book, "The Gulag Archipelago", Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn writes: "If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"

This quote is insightful because one would have thought Solzhenitsyn, a man with a first-hand experience of immense suffering and evil at the hands of his persecutors, would desire that evil people be separated and destroyed. Rather, he looks beyond his own suffering and sees the problem of evil as everyone's problem, albeit at different levels and having different expressions. Such an awareness elicits compassion, rather than condemnation, when someone becomes a puppet in the cold hands of evil. Of particular note is the last part of the quote, "... Who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?" As much as we are unwilling to destroy our

own hearts, God is unwilling to destroy his creation.

In any discourse about the problem of evil, it is theologically accurate to start with the premise that God loves the world. Although he transcends creation, God is equally immanent in the work of his hands. From the "spiritual bargain" that Abraham had with God, one can infer that righteousness attracts grace and causes justice to be tempered with mercy. God's preparedness to spare a whole nation, if righteousness could be found even in a small measure, reveals his unwillingness to destroy anything he has created. In this regard, God can be likened to a teacher who, although he is displeased with the poor performance of a class, is appeased by the good performance of one or two students in the class. This is even more expressive in the salvific act of Christ. Paul tells the Church in Colossae, "And when you were dead in trespasses...God made you alive together with him..." The righteousness of Christ, which has brought salvation to humanity, is highlighted.

There is evil in the world. However, as followers of Christ, ours is not to condemn the world, in part or whole, but rather to raise our voices in persistent prayer in times of evil. Prayer draws grace first and foremost into our own hearts, and overflows into the world we live in. The effect of prayer can be likened to a downpour of rain in a dry forest caught up in fire.

The presence of a community of faith in an environment where wickedness prevails can be likened to a light in darkness or an oasis in the desert. Such a community brings hope where life is threatened. An

Akwapim proverb puts it this way: "When strong trees come together, they break the force of a destructive wind." A community of faith is a spiritual windbreaker. Its very presence saves multitudes from perdition. When things go wrong, a prayerful response can salvage the situation. May we not give up in prayer, but rather perseveringly ask, search and knock. God's grace will be provided in times of wickedness.

### Proverb

“When strong trees come together, they break the force of a destructive wind.”

### Action

#### Self-examination

What is my response when I hear or see people committing acts of wickedness?

Do I feel compassion for the wayward or desire punishment for them?

#### Response to God

I bring before God in prayer all those who perpetrate evil in one way or the other. In a particular way, I pray for terrorists, armed robbers, Xenophobes, and all those who inflict pain on others. I pray for a change of heart for all such people.

#### Response to your World

During this week I will avoid every form of hate speech, and consciously speak words of love in every situation.

What practical steps can we take as a group, to spread the message of peace, by our words and deeds?

#### Prayer

Eternal Father, your mercy towards humanity is deep. May the grace of your Son Jesus Christ, quench the naked flames of evil in every human heart. Amen.