

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost 2019

Genesis 18:20-32 Colossians 2:6-19 Luke 11:1-13

It was a very cold, wet morning. There was a steady drizzle and a persistent wind. I stood with a group of about 40 raw recruits all dressed in shorts and PT shirts on an oval at the Kapooka Army Training Base, 'god' stood before us, but he wasn't what you might expect! He wasn't the ancient of days, but he *was* different from us, he was wearing a red and white track suit. He walked up and down the ranks, staring at us; he had run us ragged, we were all breathing heavily, a misty vapour rose from the group. After what seemed like a long time he began to berate us. We had failed to meet the basic standards, our attitude was lax, our teamwork poor, we had not listened to instructions; we were to undergo remedial training. He then yelled those words we all dreaded...push-up position, ready. That meant lying down on the wet, cold ground on our stomachs waiting for the instruction to begin push-ups under his command, raise/lower, raise/lower. One of the recruits groaned a mild expletive, 'god' heard it and we were back on our feet. Who, said that? Silence. Who said that? He walked up and down staring at each of us. Push-up position ready. We did ten, then back on our feet, who said that? More silence and so it went on. I stood still my eyes fixed on one of the signs dotted around the place proclaiming Army's values; I could see the word COURAGE.

Eventually I had a sort of Abrahamic moment and I felt moved to ask 'god' if it were right that we should all suffer because of the momentary lapse of one of our number! I thought better of it. This god was not the god of Abraham, the god of Isaac the god of Jacob. I then had another thought, a Jesus moment as it were, and before I had thought it through I blurted out... 'it was me!' 'god' rounded on me, I know it wasn't you Padre! Clearly Jesus I am not! Eventually someone did own up and we returned to barracks. I had coffee later with 'god,' his name was Dallas and we laughed together about the predicament of those raw recruits and importantly the lessons learnt! I spoke to the recruits too, they had learnt an important lesson and they too laughed...eventually!

In our passage from Genesis Abraham does speak out and God relents from his collective punishment. In this passage we are, as it were, eavesdropping on Abraham's prayer as he boldly, courageously, prays for what he wants...for justice. In the gospel Jesus teaches his disciples to do much the same. To be bold, confident to call God, Abba Father and in doing so to move from an idea of a distant God meting out collective punishment, to this sense of being with God *in Christ*, of growing, as St Paul tells us, growing as a body of brothers and sisters. And as children growing together in a collective hope, of reconciliation, a sense that we will all receive what we need and that we will not be pushed beyond breaking point, it's a prayer for justice.

St Cyprian writing on the Lord's Prayer said 'We do not say: 'My father, who are in the heavens' ... Our prayer is common and collective, and when we pray we pray not for one but for all people, because we are all one people together.' Augustine picked up this thought and wrote 'He's the only Son and

he didn't want to be the one and only; he thought it proper to have brothers and sisters. Who, after all, are the ones he tells, Say, Our Father, who art in heaven? And who did he want us to call our Father, if not his own Father?'

Clearly Abraham was not only bold but persistent. As we heard in the gospel today about the man who goes to get bread from his friend because another friend has turned up in the night and needs food. It is a passage notoriously difficult to get our heads around, steeped as it is in the culture of the day. Suffice to say that there should be boldness, persistence in prayer, we need not approach God rather shame faced. Look again at the Lucan Lord's prayer, it is extraordinarily bold, direct:

'Father, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily bread.
And forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the time of trial.'

Can you get a sense of the confidence of the prayer that Jesus asks us to pray? It's reflected in the Prayer Book introduction 'As our saviour Christ has taught us we are confident, (bold, courageous even) to say...' So whilst these are petitions they are just as much as statements of faith. I say my prayers sometimes alongside folks who don't like the word 'may' because they want to be bold. There is a sense in which this prayer reflects not just our hopes but boldness in the belief that what we most hope has already occurred or that we are at least growing into a realisation of it.

Simone Weil said 'nothing is more difficult than prayer' and whilst there is truth in this we must not be discouraged. She said this because attentiveness to God is hard. But I think when we pray we need to be most authentically ourselves in a way that we find very difficult to be. The problems of loneliness, unease within ourselves and the consequent mental health issues are well known in our day, many folk are uncomfortable in themselves. Indeed most of us find that it is difficult to bring to mind and to God some areas of our lives. Prayer is crucial to our wellbeing and mental health because in prayer we need to cease striving to be something or someone else, our hearts are opened to the God Jesus tells us to call Abba, Father, the one from whom no secrets are hidden and we can boldly seek what we want.

We all learnt something on that morning at PT, on that cold, wet, day in Wagga. The PTI was not God, fortunately, but I was reminded of the need before God to be bold, courageous, to speak up, to be honest but not ashamed, to be confident, to be yourself. Because in my experience when we do this, we have what we need, we are upheld, we are reconciled, we grow into the kingdom, we truly become brothers and sisters... and then things start to happen, perhaps even justice. Amen.