

Reflection online on Sunday 24 July by Forbes Mutch, Lay Leader of Worship

(Reading: Genesis 18: 20-33)

Talking like Abraham did

I was walking through the old Chinese market in Singapore a few years ago when I saw a set of porcelain bowls that I really liked. Now, one of the interesting things about travelling to a foreign country is that you often get the opportunity to bargain for goods in the marketplace.

In the UK, you know that if the price tag on the porcelain bowls says £19.95 for the set, you're going to pay £19.95, so you don't bother to challenge the price. But in other countries, particularly the further east you travel, there's a chance that the shopkeeper or stall holder will be willing to haggle over the price. If you're good enough at this game (which I'm not, usually), you might only pay £10 instead of £20. You can get some good deals if you're good at bargaining. In Singapore, I successfully reduced the price to £15, which left me and the stall holder satisfied.

I've always been brought up to believe that you can't bargain with God. When you're bargaining with a merchant, you hold the money and he holds the merchandise. You each have something the other person wants, so you have some bargaining power. But when it comes to God, He holds everything. Who could imagine bargaining with the God of the universe? Yet, surprisingly,

as we heard in this morning's first reading, the first instance of intercessory prayer found in the Bible, shows Abraham bargaining with God.

It's an interesting passage and, coupled with the gospel reading where Jesus explains to his disciples how to pray, the story of Abraham's discussion with God provides some insights about prayer.

I don't think I'm very good at praying. I tend to get the order wrong. I ask for what I want first and then what I think other people should have and then throw in a quick plea for my sins to be forgiven, even though I know that I'm going to commit many of them again, and then at the end, I say to God: but may *your* will be done, almost as an afterthought.

So, when I hear Abraham talking to God, I'm a bit surprised. At first, he sounds brash. But the closer you look at the story, you see that God is actually encouraging Abraham in this venture of prayer. God takes the initiative by revealing His purpose to Abraham, his friend, who is moved to pray, based on what he knows of God's purpose, for a city that is teetering on the brink of judgment. The lesson for me here is that prayer is more effective if it's based on a knowledge of God's purpose.

Prayer is not to get our will done, but to get God's will done. To be effective, prayer must be in accordance with His will. If we want to be successful in prayer, we must grow in our knowledge of God's purpose. That's not easy but that knowledge can grow if we have honest conversations with God.

And that's the second point: being a friend of God's and allowing God to be our friend. Abraham knew God, including His character and strengths. This knowledge encouraged him in prayer, to the point where he was bold enough to bargain.

The picture here resembles God as a delighted parent, holding his infant helping him walk and then letting go and stepping back so that the child has to take a step toward the parent. Then the happy parent says, "Good, good!" and repeats the process until the little one learns to take steps on his own. We see Abraham growing in the confidence of his prayers.

The third point I take from this story is that our prayers must include petitions on behalf of a world under judgment.

Although Abraham doesn't mention his nephew Lot's name when he's talking to God, Lot and his family had settled in the vicinity of Sodom and Gomorrah, and Abraham's worry about those cities surely stems from his concern for Lot's family.

A few years earlier, Abraham had rescued Lot, along with the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah, after they had been taken captive by neighbouring kings and Abraham had not only freed them but had returned all their goods to them.

It would have been easy for Abraham to see himself as better than those ungrateful, sinful pagans up to no-good in Sodom and Gomorrah and say: *They deserve God's judgment!* But there is no hint of such an attitude. Abraham humbly prays as a sinner on behalf of other

sinner, that they might be spared from God's righteous, but terrible, judgment.

I guess that we should do the same.

I don't understand why or how God works out His eternal plan in co-operation with our prayers, but He does! We who have experienced His mercy have the privilege of praying for a lost world. Someday we will have the joy of meeting in heaven those who were delivered from God's judgment through our prayers. That's going to be a big day which, I hope, is a few years away for me. In the meantime, I will just have to concentrate on getting my relationship right with God so that I can talk to him like Abraham did.

Amen

