

Sunday July 24th

If I asked you, without any warning, what was the first recorded prayer in the bible, I wonder what you'd say. Perhaps a prayer from Adam thanking God for his wonderful creation, or from Adam and Eve pleading to get back into the Garden of Eden? Or even a prayer by Noah asking God if he really wants him to build this huge boat in the Middle East? You know – a pretty dry place!? No, it's the one we heard read just now - a prayer for God to spare the people of Sodom. And the Sodomites were a byword for – well, you know what. It rather turns our ideas of a prayer upside down! And in the course of this prayer, God seems to be changing his mind, not once but several times! As Abraham actually argues with God! So we have a man arguing with God in prayer, and bargaining as he tries to get God to spare some of the worst sinners we've met in Genesis so far! You know how people used to write to the papers – usually the Daily Telegraph - sounding off about something, and signing themselves “Disgusted, Tunbridge Wells” Well, this section of Genesis might well have one of us writing and signing him or herself “Very confused, Buckingham”! So what's going on? What are we supposed to learn from this passage?

1. The first point is obvious, yet very hard. We need to learn to hate the sin, but love the sinner. And it's a lot easier to roll this glibly off the tongue than it is to carry it out. It's not so hard when the sin affects someone else, but when we are the ones who are suffering, it is very easy to find ourselves praying for the sinner to be punished rather than forgiven. But this is Jesus' command, is it not? Luke 6.35-6: **Love your enemies and do good, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the most high; for he is kind to the ungrateful and**

the selfish. Be merciful, even as your father is merciful. In other words, if we can obey this command we will actually be LIKE GOD. A remarkable reward indeed. 2. And if we can pray this prayer sincerely, look how powerful it is! Notice what happens as it progresses: God gives more and more, and in fact didn't stop giving until Abraham stopped asking! That's something to chew over, as we contemplate our hesitant, timid, respectful prayers of intercession, hedged around with caution. Strange, isn't it? God made us so that we can communicate easily with him – it's what he wants - yet I know I certainly speak for myself when I say it's perhaps the last thing we learn, or even really concentrate on, as we go through life. And however much we learn about prayer, we can be confident that there will always be more to learn... So these are perhaps my two most important points this morning: we need to love the sinner despite his/her sins, and we need to improve and develop our prayer habits throughout our lives. But don't stop listening now – I have a few more things to say! 3. Now, you may ask, if Abraham was getting on so well in haggling with God, why did he stop? It's hard to say, but maybe he just realised that he'd gone far enough, and was conscious that God would yield no more. Later in the OT, we actually find God forbidding Jeremiah to pray for Judah because they had been so disobedient (7.16): **“As for you, do not pray for this people...and do not intercede with me, for I do not hear you.”** Maybe when you are as close to God as these great men of prayer were, you just know what he wants. 4. And here's another interesting deduction from this passage. It seems to be possible for the goodness of a few to benefit the many. God was prepared to save the whole city for the sake of 10 righteous men. And so the concept of one person's goodness being enough to save many others is introduced very early in the bible, and is surely a foreshadowing of Christ's sacrifice on behalf of the whole

world centuries later. Furthermore, we see here how God is longing to find ways of showing his mercy to us. This, the very first extended prayer in the bible, shows God as flexible, not adamant. His basic quality is love and mercy. And if you think through the whole of the OT and God's dealings with his chosen people, you see him again and again giving them another chance, until eventually they go too far and are taken into exile. But even then, the ultimate return to the Holy Land is foretold – even before Jerusalem is sacked. I think it's rather too easy to fall into the view of the bible that many hold – in the OT we see a God of wrath, and in the NT a God of love. Are we guilty sometimes of painting a picture of a harsh, unrelenting God? Look at the evidence. Think for a moment of Jonah, a very contrasting character to Abraham. God sent him to Nineveh – certainly not a city full of God's chosen people – but Jonah tried very hard to avoid the commission, not thinking that there was any point in preaching to the Ninevites. In fact, unlike Abraham, if asked what he thought of them he'd probably have given a brusque retort "Let them go to hell!" or words to that effect. When he eventually fetched up there, (in Nineveh!) after his spell in the whale, they all repented and the city was saved, and Jonah went off in a monumental sulk! So despite the initial failings and reluctance of his chosen messenger, God managed to save that city! Interesting, isn't it, how God uses us to carry his message of salvation. We're perhaps more used to that concept in the NT, but here it is in the OT as well. As a picture of God's mercy, just think of the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son – how he ran out to meet his son to embrace him "when he was still a long way off" He must have been looking out for him every day, don't you think?

Then we look at the passage in Luke, who incidentally pays more attention to our Lord's prayer habits than any of the other gospel writers. Jesus tells the disciples how to pray in these familiar words which we all know. Then, immediately afterwards, he encourages them to keep on asking, and to ask boldly, continuing, in a way, what we learn from Abraham, right back early in Genesis. I've always thought this was a slightly odd parable, if we're being asked to imagine God sound asleep with dozing angels(?) scattered about him, being wakened up by our persistent prayers! But the point of the comparison is clearer when we remember this: in the ancient world there were no hotels as we know them, and consequently there were well established and in a sense quite strict rules of hospitality. If someone turned up at your house unexpectedly, you were expected, indeed bound to offer food and drink and shelter. So the knocker-up knew that the sleeping father would eventually appear at the window, albeit a trifle ruffled, and when he saw what was happening he would go back and fetch the loaf, or whatever was needed. So the point seems to be that we should ask determinedly, not half-heartedly. Nevertheless, we often find it hard to pray at all, let alone with real determination.

It has struck me that religious activity – prayer, belief in some kind of deity, the search for meaning in the world and some kind of supernatural explanation – religious activity is hard-wired into our make-up. I decided to do some googling and find out if this is true. Well, I must confess I struggled with the evidence, wrestling with technical terms I'd never seen before, and names of prehistoric eras which were only vaguely familiar, but I didn't know what order they came in - anyway, the evidence apparently suggests that as soon as our brains were big enough we began to engage in religious activity. So there you are: God made us with a propensity

for prayer. In other words we were made for prayer, so when we pray or try to, we're doing something which to some extent comes naturally. But of course in reality Satan is constantly beside us, hinting that we are actually wasting our time.

So although praying should come naturally, as we know, it often doesn't. And perseverance is not easy, especially when you seem to be making no progress and God seems indifferent. I remember once reading that Hudson Taylor, the great missionary to China, said that the prayers God answered most effectively were the ones he had had most difficulty in praying. The reality is that as soon as we pray, especially when we're interceding, we're taking part in a spiritual battle. So there is a struggle involved, even though we know we're on the winning side. The amazing thing is that God actually wants us to join in this struggle! You'd think he could manage on his own, but he has so arranged things that he can and does use our "support" – such as it is – in the fight against evil. In fact, you could argue that we are the front-line troops. This is an amazing privilege, and also an amazing responsibility. And it really helps to be organised, like any warrior. One of the things I miss about Peter Farquhar is his regular encouragement to pray in his sermons. He was a great man of prayer, and he was organised. Many have found that it helps to make a list – and it's encouraging over time to look back and see how many requests God has answered in his own time – and how he has answered them. Here's another tip we can get from Abraham. Look at how he organised his prayers for others: first for his family, Lot and co in Sodom. Then for the righteous in Sodom – so we should be praying for other Christians – friends, vicar, church leaders, missionaries we

support. And finally Abraham prayed for the unbelievers in Sodom. So we should be praying for particular unbelievers whom we know and possibly even some we don't know.

If you don't belong to one already, do think about joining a prayer cell. I'm quite sure that our habit in these cells of praying regularly for every member of our congregation is one reason why our fellowship is so strong. If you want more information about this, ask Andrew or Ben.

We're going to sing a well-known hymn in a moment: "What a friend we have in Jesus" and two lines in verse one sum it all up. "What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer." It was written by a man called Joseph Scriven, who lived in the first half of the 19th century. I looked him up, and found that the details of his life varied a little in different accounts. This much is clear however: he grew up in this country and on the night before his wedding his fiancé fell off her horse and drowned. He then went to Canada, where the same thing happened about ten years later, though this time the girl died of a severe chill. Later, his mother was ill back in England, and he couldn't go back to be with her, so he wrote this poem to cheer her up. It wasn't intended as a hymn, but someone saw it on the mother's bedside table and a tune was written, and the rest is history. Joseph Scriven spent his life befriending the poor and needy, giving everything away, obeying Christ's commands to the letter. Enjoy singing the hymn – there are eternal truths contained in its simple words.