

Sermon for 27th July 2025 (Trinity 6)

Genesis 18.20–32; Luke 11.1–13

There's a particular thread running through today's readings that I found myself wanting to explore. It begins in the old testament reading.

For the previous several chapters, God has been gradually revealing to Abraham more and more of his plans. The first part of chapter 18 is the story of the three heavenly visitors to Abraham and Sarah, bringing promises of a longed-for child in their old age, that they will be the parents of a great nation – descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. God has been gradually revealing to Abraham something of his purposes. I'm not sure why the next few verses are omitted from the lectionary, but they're kind of important, including this insight into God's mind:

The Lord said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? No, for I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, so that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him."

So God is debating how much of his plans to share with Abraham. This is sometimes interpreted as God debating whether to tell Abraham that he is about to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, but given the wider context, it's much more likely that it's about the bigger story, the story of promise, the story of how God is going to draw mercy and justice out of a world that seems intent on the opposite.

Which brings us to this strange and compelling conversation between Abraham and God. Sodom and Gomorrah are indeed under judgment. The sins of these cities are serious —later, the prophets will talk about these sins in terms of injustice, cruelty, indifference to the poor, a disregard for the radical hospitality that is God's command for his people, and which Abraham embodied abundantly in the way he welcomed those three heavenly visitors, and which Lot also shows in chapter 19, standing out starkly from the lawless violence that surrounds him.

And God says that the outcry about this prevailing culture in the cities has reached him. Already, this suggests something important: God hears the cries of the suffering. God is not distant or aloof. God listens.

But then we see this dialogue unfold between God and Abraham. And it can sound, at first glance, like a haggling session at a market stall: "Will you destroy the city if there are fifty righteous people? Forty-five? Forty?" All the way down to ten.

But Abraham isn't really bargaining. He's discovering. This is not about a transaction—it's about a transformation. Abraham is being drawn into God's own heart. He starts off pleading, perhaps nervously, cautiously, unsure how far he can go. But step by step, he finds that God is already ahead of him. "Will not the judge of all the earth do what is just?" he asks. And the answer is yes—but God's justice is never separated from mercy.

This is one of the first real conversations Abraham has with God that isn't just about his own future, his own call, his own household. Here, he's praying for others—for people he doesn't know, who may not deserve it. This is intercession. And it's not about changing God's mind—it's about learning what God's mind is like. Learning that God, too, desires to save rather than to destroy. Abraham is being drawn into the very character of God.

And if this is prayer, then we can say that prayer changes us. Not because God needs convincing, but because we do. God waits for Abraham to become emotionally invested in the people of the cities, to look beyond his own household, his own family, his own destiny, and to start seeing the bigger picture of God's purposes. And then God matches that empathy with his own. In prayer, Abraham is learning how to know God, how to desire what God desires.

[Of course, we learn in the following Chapter what happens to those two cities, because there were not even ten righteous – instead, God saves Lot and his family, just as he saved Noah and his family at the flood].

In Luke's Gospel, we see a similar process at work, but more intimate. "Lord, teach us to pray as John taught his disciples," the disciples say. They see Jesus pray, and they are drawn to it. They want that closeness. That connection that Jesus seems to have with God his Father.

Jesus gives them a short, clear, wide-ranging prayer:

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

It's a prayer of enormous depth. It speaks of God's holiness and majesty—"hallowed be your name"—and of the nearness and tenderness of God as "Father." It speaks of the Kingdom and of daily bread. Of cosmic hope and of concrete need. It speaks of forgiveness received and offered. And it trusts God enough to say, "Protect us when things get hard."

But Jesus doesn't stop there. He goes on to tell a parable about a friend who knocks at midnight, asking for bread—not for himself, but so that he can offer hospitality. The prayer for daily bread isn't selfish. It's communal. It's Eucharistic, even: bread received, becomes bread shared.

And the point is this: you can go to God in the middle of the night, because you're in relationship, or would like to be. The parable, just like Abraham's conversation with God, seems at first to be about persuading God to do what we want, as if God really was just another neighbour who is reluctant to get out of bed. But we already know what kind of God this is. We know that God listens. We can ask, and we can keep asking—not because we need to convince God, but because God delights in our coming, and in how

we are transformed by bringing our needs and the needs of our neighbours to God in prayer.

This is why Jesus says: “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened.” Prayer isn’t a vending machine—put in your prayer, get your result. It’s a relationship invitation: keep asking, because in the asking you are becoming more deeply connected to the one who gives.

And Jesus ends with this lovely image: “If you, who are human, know how to give good gifts to your children, *how much more* will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask?” The best gift, in the end, is God’s own presence. God’s Spirit. Not daily bread, but the kingdom in our midst. Not just a solution to our problems, but a transformation of who we are, a deepening of the relationship that underpins all our relationships.

In Genesis, Abraham learns to want what God wants. In Luke, the disciples learn to trust the generosity of God and to ask for what they need. In both, prayer is revealed not as magic, not as manipulation, but as relationship. And relationships change us.

Prayer opens our hearts. It helps us understand our deepest needs and desires. It turns us from self-interest to mercy. It calls us to care for the ones we might otherwise forget. It teaches us to long for justice and for kindness and for the wisdom that allows us to hold onto both. To believe that our enemies might yet become our neighbours. To hunger not only for bread, but for reconciliation. And to trust that there is a door that will be opened, because the one who stands behind it knows our voice and calls us their children.

Both Abraham and the disciples are learning, slowly, humbly, what it means to be in covenant with a God who listens and who loves. For Abraham, this is the beginning of discovering that the promise made to him—to become a blessing to all nations—requires deep participation in God’s character. For the disciples, it’s the beginning of discovering that Jesus is inviting them to share in his own intimacy with the Father.

We, too, are invited. When we pray, we’re not just sending out our requests to a far-off deity. We’re drawing close to the heart of God. We’re being reshaped. And as we pray—for justice, for mercy, for daily bread—we may find that the things we ask for are the very things God already desires to give.

So we keep asking. Keep knocking. Keep trusting. We let prayer not only express our needs, but form our hearts. And we let it draw us again and again, into the mystery of a God who is both judge and mercy, both hallowed and Father, both everywhere and closer to us than we are to ourselves.

Amen.