

17th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

The Jewish tale is told of a man who argued with God. It happened one day in the synagogue when Ben Ezra was pouring out his prayer so vigorously that the rabbi grew worried and said to him: “You are a headstrong man, Ben Ezra. Perhaps you argue instead of pray.”

Ben Ezra replied: “Listen, rabbi and I will tell you what I have been saying. To the master of the universe I say this:

These are my sins and I confess them. I argued with my wife, but you know my wife ! I lost patience with my children, but what parent doesn't? I cheated a little in the shop, but just a little. How small my sins are, Master of the universe, but they are mine and I confess them. And now, Master, consider your sins. Sometimes you dry up the skies and our crops wither in the fields. Other times they burn up because you send too much sun. You let the rains come before a poor man has his roof repaired. You do not stop war and the young men die. The marriage bed is empty, and there is no child in the womb. You take away the light from the eyes of a child and he is blind. You take away our loved ones and we are left alone until we too must die. These are your sins, Master of the universe, and they are great. But I will make you a proposal. You forgive me my little sins and I will forgive you your great ones.

That was my proposal, rabbi, and I ask you what was wrong ?”

The rabbi did not answer for a long time. And then he looked at Ben Ezra and said, “No, it was not wrong. But why, oh why, Ben Ezra, did you drive so small a bargain ? For sins like these you could have asked him to send the messiah. You could have asked him to redeem the world.”

In today's first reading it is Abraham, not Ben Ezra who is bargaining with God over the number of just people needed to save two cities from destruction. There is a comical picture of Abraham as a shrewd and persistent bargain hunter at a Dutch auction – where the price decreases – fifty, forty-five, thirty, twenty, ten. Sod to the canny patriarch !! Abraham is the street-wise character who presses God for the best deal possible. God is portrayed as a patient dealer, who is not a testy and difficult to deal with as people might imagine. As Abraham wonders whether God will get angry at his final markdown of the original price, God agrees not to destroy the cities for the sake of ten good people.

An equally generous picture of God emerges from Paul's letter that we heard: "God has forgiven us all our sins and cancelled every record of debt that we had to pay." Paul argues that God has done that in a very dramatic way: he has nailed all our debts to the cross of Jesus. In the Jewish story of bargaining with God, the rabbi told Ben Ezra he should have upped the stakes by asking God to send the messiah. As Christians that is precisely what we believe God did. In the cross of Christ, all our sins, small and great, are forgiven.

However, that image of a generous and forgiving God is not one that people readily believe in. That is why, when Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, he insists that they relate to God as Father, *Abba*, and approach him in the confidence of children who know they are loved. To press home his point Jesus uses another character who is bold in the pursuit of what he wants. This one loudly argues his case in the middle of the night until the sleepy owner of the house eventually gives in to be rid of the midnight racket! That is Jesus' model of the smart disciple; the one who doesn't know when to quit. True disciples are very hard to get rid of!

Jesus believes that persistence in prayer is worthwhile precisely because God is not some sultry, withdrawn figure who is unmoved by what he hears. Behind Jesus' advice on prayer is his image of a God who really does want to help and to save.

But people say: "Yes. But I've done the nine Fridays, the five Tuesdays, and the three Saturdays. Also the novena to St. Jude. I've joined the charismatic movement, I'm involved in shared prayer, dialogue homilies, and sunset meditations. And still I come up with zero!" Jesus' answer is that it is still worthwhile to keep on asking, to keep on knocking, because God is more than silence: he is also Word, and he will reply.

In the end Jesus will stake his own life on that belief. His passion and death are the most powerful appeal to his Father for the sake of all of us. In the end Ben Ezra received his answer from God. For God did send the Messiah in Jesus, and he did hear the cry of the Messiah's appeal to forgive us all our sins. And that is our most precious bargain.