

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, C – July 24, 2016 – Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Sat., 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 745 words

In our first reading we heard about one of the “sins that cry out to heaven for vengeance”; the Lord says: “The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great, and their sin so grave, that I must go down and see whether or not their actions fully correspond to the cry against them that comes to me.” And there are four other places in Sacred Scripture that speak of sins that cry to heaven because of their particular gravity. The *Catechism* lists the five total as the sin of murder, the sin of the Sodomites, oppression of the poor, oppression of the disadvantaged, and injustice to wage earners.¹ All we have to do is watch the news on any given day to know that we are “five for five” in our country with these sins. And so we ask ourselves: with all of these things that cry to God for vengeance, how much longer will he let us go until the destruction for which these sins clamor comes upon us?

In the reading, though, a rather unusual dialog between Abraham and the Lord follows. Abraham basically haggles with God, the way one might dicker with a salesman at the market. “What if there were fifty innocent people in the city – would you still destroy it?”, he effectively says. And he continues all the way down to ten – the Lord, each time, saying he would save the city. In the end, we see the great value that God places upon righteousness: because of the faithful he will tolerate the unfaithful. “Tolerate”, however, does not mean “approve”. Their sin still cries out to heaven for vengeance! Something must still be done about it. If it is not repented from, then it must still be punished. And even if the punishment is delayed because of the presence of righteous people, it will happen eventually. Indeed, the longer the sin persists, the greater the punishment will be. In short, destruction might be warded off for a time, but that does not necessarily mean that everything is OK.

And this is the situation in which we find ourselves. To put it another way: perhaps we are “five for five” in our nation with respect to the sins that cry to heaven, but the Lord is still holding back the hand of the destroyer because of the righteous people who plea to him. Does this not ultimately place a new burden upon the righteous? Good prayer often leads to action; the righteous have the task not only of praying but of then of acting on that. Here the concept of evangelization again arises: seeking to lead others to God, to conversion of life, to repentance from sin. If all we were to do was plea for our nation with God, our prayer would be selfish – it would be so that we are not affected by the sin of others. But if we were to plea for our nation with God, so that we then had time to go out, in charity, and lead others to repentance and to Christ, to resist and overcome injustices, and to help the broken to find healing – this would be a holy prayer indeed.

Prayer, then, is only a starting point; and it is a necessary starting point. If we do not pray before we act, we risk becoming activists – and there are more than enough of them out there today! Only with prayer can we hope to effect lasting change. I always recall Psalm 127: “If the Lord does not build the house, in vain do its builders labor”. Some people, however, will say that prayer just seems so ineffective. Answers to prayer seem so few in number or so long in coming. But this is the lesson of the gospel: persistence and perseverance in prayer. Good prayer leads us to be humbly dependent upon the Lord. And repeated pleading – sometimes over a long period of time – reinforces in us the awareness that without the Lord, we truly can do nothing.² This is one of the reasons why God does not function as a vending machine, instantly dispensing whatever we seek: he wants us to grow in dependence upon him, to grow in a relationship with

¹ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1867.

² Cf. John 15:5.

him. We need to pray more. We need to persevere in prayer. And we need to let it lead us to faithful action so that, with the Lord's help, those headed toward punishment might change course and repent.