

17th Sunday, 2007

1. According to the Talmud, which is the collection of ancient Israel's civil and religious laws and a commentary on them, God has arranged that at all times that there are 36 righteous people in the world, for without these people the world would end. An interesting thought: How many good people are needed to keep the world going? In our first reading today we hear Abraham pleading with God not to destroy the sinful city of Sodom. You remember how it went. Abraham starts off pleading for the life of the city if there are fifty good people in it. Then he keeps going down in the number. What if there are forty, then thirty, then twenty, then ten. And God agrees: Yes, even if there are only ten., I will spare Sodom. Perhaps this reading reflects the life of a mid-eastern market where people argue about prices. We do things a little differently in this country. We wait for a sale.

2. What this story presumes of course is that Abraham knows what kind of God he is dealing with, a God who is reasonable, and, even more than reasonable, merciful. You don't haggle with someone who is not merciful and reasonable. This is the kind of God Jesus also believed in and the kind of God he teaches us to believe in. The tip-off is the name Jesus gives us to use when addressing God.

We are to address him as Father. We take that name for granted, but we shouldn't. We are calling the Mystery of the Universe, the creator of the universe, by a familial name. We dare to say: Our Father. When we stop to think about it, that thought should take our breath away. God is our Father.

3. As you know, the New Testament was written in Greek. But once in awhile a foreign word sneaks in, and one such word is the Aramaic word Abba. In Mark's account of the agony in the garden Jesus prays: "Abba, all things are possible to You; remove this cup from me; but not what I will, but what you will" (Mk 14: 36). What does that Aramaic word mean? Years ago I discovered that Catholics in the Holy Land refer to their priests as Abba Peter or Abba Paul, etc. Thus it is our equivalent of Father Peter or Paul. That is also its meaning in Mark's Gospel, for there Jesus prays: "Abba, Father...." We might say to ourselves: if the two words are identical in meaning, why use both? Apparently, both Mark and Paul in two of his Letters (Romans and Galatians) thought it worthwhile to give the Aramaic word as well. Thus it would seem that they want to tell us that this is the word Jesus used when he prayed in his native language, Aramaic. And some commentators believe that this word stands behind the word Father which Luke

gives us in today's Gospel where Jesus teaches his disciples how to address God.

4. Therefore the question for us is: Do we see God as our Father, our Abba? Are we willing to haggle with him as Abraham did because we know that he can be haggled with because he is reasonable and merciful, and, even more so, because he is our Abba, our Father? Certainly that is what the example from human family life Jesus uses in today's Gospel wishes to teach us. He says to us: Look, if you know that a human father, with all his limitations, would never give his child anything harmful, would never give the child a stone when the child asks for bread or a scorpion when the child asks for an egg, then don't you realize that God who is utter goodness would never give you, his child, anything that is bad. So ask away! God will give you only good things because he is your father, your Abba.

This is Good News; this is the Gospel of the Lord.