

SERMON FOR THE 24TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST (Cape Town - 26 October 2008)

Text: ²⁰ Then the LORD said, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous ²¹ that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know." ²² And the LORD came and stood before Abraham. ²³ Then Abraham approached him and said: "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ²⁴ What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? ²⁵ Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" ²⁶ The LORD said, "If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake." ²⁷ Then Abraham spoke up again: "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes, ²⁸ what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city because of five people?" "If I find forty-five there," he said, "I will not destroy it." ²⁹ Once again he spoke to him, "What if only forty are found there?" He said, "For the sake of forty, I will not do it." ³⁰ Then he said, "May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak. What if only thirty can be found there?" He answered, "I will not do it if I find thirty there." ³¹ Abraham said, "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, what if only twenty can be found there?" He said, "For the sake of twenty, I will not destroy it." ³² Then he said, "May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there?" He answered, "For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it." ³³ When the LORD had finished speaking with Abraham, he left, and Abraham returned home. (Gen.18:20-33)

This is a well-known story that most of you will have heard before. But I must confess when I started studying this story in the past week it captivated me more than ever before. I came across a number of most interesting and thought-provoking aspects. And I sincerely hope that I can convey just some of these aspects to you today. If I can, your faith will be revitalised as indeed mine was in this past week, and your heart (as mine) will for full of joy towards a most wonderful God.

From the outset let me tell you what raised my initial interest to this story. I came across a quote from the great 17th century French philosopher called François-Marie Arouet, better known as Voltaire. Voltaire is being quoted as saying that Genesis 18, the very passage I read to you, is one of the reasons why he cannot believe in God. He referred to this story as that of a quarrelsome Jew (Abraham, for whom he had no time) and that of a far too "humanlike" God (for whom he could have no respect or honour).

I am quite convinced that Voltaire totally misunderstood the story and that he failed to realise what makes our relationship with God and indeed our Christian faith so special. In this prayer spoken by Abraham, I don't see the trait marks of a quarrelsome Jew. And further more, I definitely don't take offense as Voltaire did of the so called humanlike characteristics of God. On the contrary, these are the very characteristics that draw me closer to God. I rejoice in a God with whom I can interact, as Abraham did, rather than a sovereign being who is preprogrammed like a robot and whose responses to me are all predetermined

and fixed.

The story starts with an “outcry” that reaches God heaven. It is not said from whom the outcry came, but the reason for it is clearly communicated. There is an outcry for grievous sins committed in the two ancient cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

The story is indeed littered with human like characteristics of God. On hearing of the grievous sins in the two cities, God does summarily lash out. He is not one who listens to gossip. Instead God decides to “come down” and see for himself how bad the sins really were.

But what follows immediately after this, is so striking, that the ancient scribes decided to change the words of our text. Once God had established for himself the severity of the sins, and they were bad, he does something extraordinary. Before he destroys the cities, we read in verse 22 of the original text: **“And the LORD came and stood before Abraham.”** For the scribes that didn’t make sense. In fact, they took offense. They said: “Why in the world should the sovereign Lord stand before Abraham?” So they changed the word order around to read: “And Abraham came and stoop before the Lord”. And that is, by the way, the reading of most modern day translations. But that is not what was originally written: We read that God stoop before Abraham.

The obvious question is: Why? Why would God before exercising his righteous punishment against Sodom and Gomorrah first seek the face of Abraham?

This is interesting to say the least. It is almost as if God is reluctant to punish. We know from other parts of Scripture that God takes no joy in punishing his people. He is first and foremost a God of love and mercy. But his righteousness calls on him to punish sin. We see here, God does not rush in. Instead he calls on Abraham, it seems, because he wants somebody to side with on the side of mercy - against his very own wrath.

Notably it is not Abraham that initiates this conversation, but God. And that us true for us as well. We really battle with intercessory prayer, don’t we? Most of the time we just pray for ourselves, and if God wants to punish the sins of the people around us, let him proceed. But sometimes God steps in. And he comes and stands right in front of us and says: “Someone needs your prayer. Somebody will be punished if you don’t pray.” God is looking for people to strengthen his mercy. In our passage, he is calling on Abraham.

However, up to this point, there wasn’t much reliance on Abraham. Abraham was still growing in his faith. God’s walk with Abraham started with a lovely promise. We read in Genesis 12, God saying to Abraham: **“I will bless you... and all**

peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (v.3). But up to this point, it hadn't happened.

You may recall the story when Abraham and his wife Sarah, at a time of severe drought, travelled to Egypt. On arriving in Egypt Abraham did something awful. Sarah being a beautiful woman, Abraham feared that the Egyptians might kill him in order to take his wife. And when Pharaoh started inquiring about Sarah, Abraham lied about her true identity. In order to save his life, he said, Sarah was his sister. And when Pharaoh took her to himself, great hardship came over all of Egypt. The Egyptians suffered because of Abraham. There was no blessing flowing from Abraham to “all peoples”.

But luckily God never recalls a promise given. He is patient. And here in our story we see what can be termed the “tipping point” in Abraham's life, and how (at last) he realises this promise of become a blessing to all peoples.

Years before this, Abraham may have responded to God, saying: “Go ahead. Punish these people. The people in Sodom and Gomorrah are not my concern.” We may say: “The leaders in Zimbabwe, our neighbours across the street, are not my concern.” That is how people speak that don't know God.

Abraham, we see here, has changed. Here he becomes the blessing that God always intended him to be.

What follows is an extremely touching account. Most striking is the contents of of Abraham's prayer. Abraham filled with the Spirit that can only come from God himself sides with those to be punished... and he prays for “collective forgiveness.”

This is a “first” in the Old Testament. There are quite a few stories of “collective punishment”. Collective punishment is, “all” are punished because one person sinned. Our children may know it from the classroom setting. One boy is naughty and doesn't own up and the whole class is punished. We have similar stories in the Old Testament. The story is told for example of a man named Achan. He formed part of the Israelite army. On conquering a city, Achan contrary to God's instructions, took some treasures for himself and hid them in his tent. And as result the Israelites were constantly being defeated, because of the sin of the one man, called Achan. (cf Josuah 7).

In this prayer to God Abraham turns this concept around. He argues: If a whole nation can be punished for the sin of one person, shouldn't it also be possible, that the life of whole nation can per spared because of the righteousness of just a few?

Abraham says to God: ***“What if there are fifty righteous people in the city. Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it?”*** (v. 24). And God says, ***“If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake”*** (v.26). And Abraham, very humbly says: ***“Now that I have been so bold to speak.... (how about) 45... (how about) 40.... (how about)30?”*** And right at the end he says: ***“Please don’t be angry, but what if only ten (righteous) can be found there?”*** And God says: ***“For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it.”***

Genesis 18 testifies to the miracle that God cedes to Abraham’s requests. He accepts his argument that if there is something like collective punishment, surely there should also be room for collective mercy: The righteousness of a few can lead to the mercy of the many. This is the heart of intercessory prayer.

The crucial question that remains is: Why did Abraham stop at ten? Why not seven or five or two? Commentators and theologians provide various answers. One answer is that “ten”, which in the Old Testament represents the 10 tribes of Israel, is the number for the “church of Christ” in the New Testament. This would highlight the huge role which we as a church have in praying for others. Because a church prays, a country can be saved. But if there is no church any more that prays, there is no hope. God’s wrath has to strike the city.

But there is another theory regarding the number 10. Some commentators suggest that Abraham stopped at 10 out of respect and honour for the one Righteous, who indeed came to carry our sins upon himself, Jesus Christ.

The sad story of Genesis 18 is that God did not find the 10 righteousness to save Sodom and Gomorrah. Both cities were destroyed. But the Good News of the New Testament is: When God did not find the 10 righteous on earth to enable his mercy to prevail, he himself stood in the breach in the form of his Son. In him he took the guilt, the pain, the punishment of this world upon himself, so that his righteous judgement could be overcome by his boundless mercy.

Now choose for yourself: Are you going to side with Voltaire and say: This God is to humanlike... I can’t believe in him? Or will you side with the millions of Christians who all rejoice in a God whose mercy drives him to become one of us and a God who invites us to become his partners in prayer on the side of mercy? Amen.

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