

As in ancient times, shopping in Israel and the Middle East still occurs through haggling. Proper etiquette, however, demands that you do not begin entering into negotiations unless you plan on actually purchasing something. Even then, you have to be careful lest you end up walking away with something you don't want or can't afford. As I learned the hard way, sometimes even seemingly innocent conversations with a shopkeeper can end with you walking away with half the shop.

This experience came to mind as I was reflecting on today's first reading. At first glance, it seems like Abraham has entered into a similar type of haggling session with God. God initially says that He is prepared to wipe away the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, but Abraham counters, saying, "Will you sweep away the innocent with the guilty? Suppose there were fifty innocent people in the city; would you wipe out the place, rather than spare it for the sake of the fifty innocent people?" God agrees and emboldened by this Abraham keeps pushing until God declares that He will spare the city if at least ten innocent people can be found.

Despite how it seems, the truth is that Abraham was not able to convince God to be merciful. The real person who is changed in this experience is Abraham, not God. As Abraham continued to persist in prayer and wrestle with God, he was able to discover God's great mercy for His people which had always been there. Prayer is not a magic way to force God to do what we want. Instead, prayer is a way for us to come to know and take on the very heart of God.

This understanding can help us to enter more deeply into today's Gospel. The disciples gathered around Jesus and asked him, "Lord, teach us to pray just as John taught his disciples." In reply, Jesus taught them the most famous of all Christian prayers, the Our Father. Most, if not all of us here, were taught this prayer as children and can rattle it off from memory. This can be problematic, however, because we can often pray this prayer without actually thinking about what we are saying.

We are all more familiar with the version found in the Gospel of Matthew, but today's more condensed version from the Gospel of Luke is useful in helping us to focus on the core of Jesus' prayer. While Matthew's prayer begins with "Our Father, who art in heaven", Luke's version simply says "Father"... *Abba*... the intimate name a child would use for his Father. We are invited through this prayer into an intimate relationship with God, invited to share in the same intimacy that Jesus has with His Father. This should not be some abstract, distant relationship, but an intimate union with God through which we share our deepest fears and desires.

After this, Jesus tells us to pray "hallowed be your name." This recalls Mary's great Magnificat when she said, "holy is his name." To confess God's holiness is to confess that He is sanctified, set apart above all others, and that we worship Him above all other things. And yet, at the same time this proclaims that we will seek to hallow His name throughout the world by the holiness of our own lives.

Thus, it makes sense that we go on to pray, "your kingdom come." Matthew expounds on this by saying, "your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." In praying these words, we ask that God's work of salvation might be accomplished in the world. After Christ's death and resurrection, it also became clear that He was teaching us to pray that everyone might accept His Kingship in their lives as we long for that glorious day when Christ will return in glory.

After begging for God's will to be done in our lives, we pray "give us each day our daily bread." Throughout His earthly ministry, Jesus constantly taught us to trust that our Heavenly Father will provide for all of our needs. He then proved this by tending to the needs of those around Him. And yet, there is a deeper meaning here as well because the word translated as "daily" also means "super-substantial." In other words, we are asking God to give us both the things we need to survive today as well as His presence in that super-substantial bread which is the Eucharist.

This encounter with Christ should recall Peter's first encounter with Christ when he cried out, "Leave me Lord, for I am a sinful man." Again and again throughout the Scriptures, those who encounter Christ and His merciful love are moved to repentance. Is it any wonder that after we beg God to reveal His loving presence to us that we immediately proclaim, "forgive us our sins."

As Jesus taught us, however, it is not enough to simply ask for our own forgiveness. Through many parables and teachings, Jesus taught us that God will only forgive our sins to the extent that we forgive and show mercy to those around us. And so, Jesus goes on by praying, "forgive us our sins for we ourselves forgive everyone in debt to us."

Jesus' message of salvation was always oriented towards the coming final judgement when the Son of Man sits on His glorious throne to separate us one from another like the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He taught us to be prepared for this day lest it catch us like a thief in the night. So, He ends by praying, "lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." Luke says it much more simply as "do not subject us to the final test." Protect us from the evil one and his trials so that we might be found blameless and ready in God's sight on that day when God's Kingdom is fully realized in this world.

In the end, we see that the prayer Jesus taught us is the most perfect Christian prayer because it contains a summary of everything that He came to teach us. In wrestling with these words, we are not bartering with God but being plunged more deeply into His merciful plan for us. Therefore, as if we were shopping in Israel, we must not pray these words lightly but only utter them if we are willing to keep the promises contained within them lest we walk away with a bill that we cannot pay.