**Genesis 18:22-33**

When it comes to us thinking about prayer, this passage from Genesis 18 is quite important, because it is the first full prayer recorded in the Bible. And Abraham is a great example of someone who grew with God through his own weaknesses and failings; something that we can perhaps all relate to.

And this great prayer is set in the context of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, a famous story that I don’t really want to touch on because it’s not relevant to what we are thinking about. Instead, I want to focus on this interaction between Abraham and God to see what it has to teach us about prayer.

It’s a fascinating encounter in which Abraham dares to barter with God and seemingly tries to get God to change his mind about a particular issue. And, to be honest, that’s how many of us approach prayer, isn’t it? If we can badger God for long enough and make promises to him about how we will read our Bible every day and be kind to everyone, if only he will change his mind about something, step in and make a difference and do what we ask him to do on our behalf…

Is that really what prayer is about? Is that really what we are trying to do when we pray? Is prayer about bartering with God, to get him to do what we want?

Of course, it’s more profound than that, as we learn from this story, which you can follow with me on page 15 right at the beginning of the Pew Bibles in the first section, the Old Testament.

So let’s begin by thinking about the nature of prayer itself…

If we look back over our lives, our personal history is marked by relationships that have been very intimate with other people: a deep sharing of ourselves with people we love. And that depth of relationship is so important to us as we learn to be vulnerable with others, to open ourselves up and share with others precious memories or private feelings or frail emotions. And that depth of intimacy is, in a sense, a model for prayer, which Abraham offers in this passage, verse 22: “So the men turned from there, and went towards Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the Lord.”

At long last, it was all quiet. Abraham was left alone with God: just the two of them. They were in solitude together, on the Judean hills, looking out over the Dead Sea. Silence: just the two of them. It’s reminiscent of Adam and Eve walking with God in the Garden of Eden, isn’t it?

Those moments of quiet intimacy are so important…I remember being with Jo and Scott, Lee and Rebekah at the Grand Canyon as the sun rose across the horizon and the darkness gave way to this most incredible landscape and we all stood there in silence together, no need to say anything: we were in the moment together – a really intimate family experience…It might ruin the image of that for you if I tell you the truth that five minutes later, Rebekah – who had a stomach bug at the time – threw up into the Grand Canyon, actually, and we ended up having to take her to hospital…but forget the ending to the story: just hold the image of family intimacy in your mind!

Because this moment between Abraham and God was an intimate, quiet moment as they stood together looking out over God’s marvellous creation.

And in that quietness, Abraham was able to pour his heart out to God; to say things it would have been impossible to say in front of others: a very intimate moment, a very powerful moment.

When we pray, we are given the privilege of entering into the very presence of God on our own; to pour out our hearts to him in a moment of absolute intimacy. The Psalmist wrote: “Before a word is on my tongue, you know it completely, O Lord”. That is an incredible thought - that in prayer we become totally intertwined with God; so close that nothing can come between us. It doesn’t matter if we think our prayers are inadequate. Someone once said, “Fear not because your prayer is stammering, your words feeble and your language poor. Jesus can understand you.”

So, we see from this passage that the nature of prayer is personal and intimate and that, of course, has a deep impact on the attitude we have when we come to pray…

I think that prayer can sometimes be like walking a tightrope because, when we pray, we need to carefully balance between two distinct attitudes and if we tip too far in one direction, we will fall…But in this prayer, we see Abraham perfectly balancing…

First, he was bold in the way he prayed: “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous?” “Far be it from you to do such a thing…” “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?”…and he keeps pressing God to give more and more…“Suppose there are fifty people?” “What about if there are forty people?” “What are you going to do for thirty?” “Aren’t twenty people worth saving?” “Can’t your justice stretch to just ten people?”

Abraham pushed God to his very limits in prayer. He was bold in his approach to God and it was only possible for him to be bold because he had a personal relationship with God.

And that’s a relationship with God that we are all invited into. In his first letter, John wrote that, “this is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.” When we pray in the name of Christ Jesus, according to the will of God, we can be sure that our prayers are heard…That is the basis of our prayer life. That is the reason for our confidence in prayer. That is our hope for the future.

But we have to remember the tightrope walker. If she leans too far in one direction, she falls off

and likewise, if we are only bold in prayer, we too will fall. Because, in this passage, Abraham balances boldness with immense humility, verse 27: “I am but dust and ashes...”

When we come to God in prayer, we are to be bold in our requests. But we must never forget to whom we are talking. Like Abraham, we are but dust and ashes and we need to always remember that as we approach the throne of grace.

It’s true to say that Abraham was intimate with God - but he never became over-familiar. We cannot manipulate God in our prayers like a genie in the lamp. Our prayers should reflect the spirit of Abraham.

First, then, the nature of prayer is personal and intimate.

Second, the attitude of prayer mixes boldness with humility.

And then, finally, we consider what the object of Abraham’s prayer was: what does he pray for? What was the object of Abraham’s prayer?

At first sight, it seems he has a set agenda that he wants God to answer: the people of Sodom are his only concern. Well, he was concerned about them and when we pray, there are always specific needs we want to bring to him. But if we look at the passage again, the object of his prayer is not the people of Sodom so much as the nature of God himself. Look at verse 25: “Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?”

You see the real issue here. It’s not so much the people of Sodom. It’s the nature of God: that God has to be true to his own nature.

Abraham is tapping into the very heart of God. He is discerning the true nature of God and then urging himself to be true to himself. Twice, Abraham says, “That’s impossible!” In the Hebrew, what he is really saying is, “That’s impure!”

Abraham is not asking God to save the innocent through an act of moral kindness. He is arguing his case on account of God’s character and innate Being. God, as God, cannot be impure – otherwise he would not be God…so therefore, by definition, God cannot damn the innocent.

The basis of Abraham’s prayer is to seek after the right-ness – the righteousness – of God. And this is really important to us to help us understand our own salvation because you and I are only too aware of our sin and the filth of our lives. As we look back over our lives, we know that we have been far from innocent. But, as Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians 5, “Anyone who is joined to Christ is a new being; the old has gone, the new has come…God did not keep an account of [our] sins…that in union with him we might share the righteousness of God.” As Christians, we are new beings, we share the righteousness of God. So when God looks at you and me, he doesn’t see our sin, he just sees his own righteousness reflected in us through his image.

So when we pray to be forgiven for our sins, we are not begging God and somehow hoping that he will be in a good mood: there is nothing capricious or unpredictable about God’s forgiveness. God, by his very nature, because he is righteous, will always forgive - otherwise he would not be God! As John wrote in his first letter: “If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins…”

We can be absolutely sure that God has forgiven us, and will always forgive us, not because God is a jolly nice chap but because that is who he is – as God!. We can have confidence, even boldness, before the throne of grace.

That is not to say we should be arrogant. Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians 10:17, “Whoever wants to boast must boast about what the Lord has done”. It’s not my righteousness. It’s not your righteousness. It’s God’s righteousness at work within us. So we need to remember that when we pray, we are not trying to get God to do what we want; we are trying to discover who God is and where he is to be found in any given situation. That is the true object of prayer - to discern God’s will for the world and to align ourselves with that accordingly.

So then, in this passage, Abraham reveals three things about prayer. The nature of prayer is intensely personal and intimate. The attitude of prayer is a balance between boldness and humility. The object of prayer is to seek out the very heart of God: who he is in himself. If we hold these three ideas in mind, our approach to prayer becomes transformed.

It doesn’t matter if we feel inadequate or beginners in prayer: Charles Spurgeon said that, “when we pray, the simpler our prayers are the better; the plainest humblest language which expresses our meaning is the best”. There are no Graduates from the School of Prayer. But if we continue to pray with boldness, with humility, in simplicity, in intimacy, earnestly seeking the face of God…we will continue to grow in our relationship with him and continue to be used for his purposes, just as Abraham was.

Prayer is at the heart of our relationship with God. No matter how weak and faltering our prayers may be: it doesn’t matter - God will hear us and answer according both to his will and his nature.

And so we can have great confidence when we pray and we celebrate that truth this morning.