

Sermon for Evening Prayer
Westcott House – Tuesday May 14th 2007

Numbers 16: 36 - ; Luke 6: 39

Jesus said, it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.

Since the Middle Ages, the days approaching the Feast of the Lord's Ascension have been kept as Rogation Days – days of special intercession for the land, and for the area in which the local Church ministers. It has its roots in the latin verb *rogare*, meaning to ask. And because of this, I want to think tonight about the theme of intercessory prayer; what we might be doing when we offer intercessions.

Amidst the plethora of parables and practical wisdom in tonight's New Testament reading, Jesus comments that it is "out of the abundance of the *heart* that the *mouth* speaks." Intercession is the praying mouth of the Church's heart. And the Church's heart is made abundant by the gifts given by the Risen Christ in his Holy Spirit. So when the Church intercedes, we notice that this is a two-pronged priestly activity: the Church gives voice on the one hand, to the longing of the world, that God's promises of peace, justice, love and forgiveness should be fulfilled. We are vocalising a fundamental, overflowing hope that the world can be transformed because of the Resurrection of Jesus, and the sending of His Holy Spirit; that truth which is at the heart of Christian proclamation. The other part of this priestly activity is that the Church shares in the prayer which is constantly offered by the Risen Christ in eternal relationship with the Father. The Church participates in Christ's mission as a result of intercessory prayer. We might even go so far as to say that through grace, the Holy Spirit empowers the Church to share in the fruits of that mission. And so intercession is a privileged activity, because for the Christian, it is a participation in that life of prayer and relationship which has its origin in God's love for the World, and God's drawing of all creation into Godself. But particularly within the context of Rogation, praying for the world in which we live, love and work, I want to consider this theme of intercession in three particular ways.

Firstly, *recognition*. Intercession recognises the arena of God's activity. It proclaims that there is nothing, no-one, nowhere outside the reach of God's love. The old practice of beating the bounds of the parish reminds us of this in a very physical way. Walking around the parish, singing hymns, saying prayers at the particular focal points of the community's life is an act which recognises that God's grace permeates all creation, and that this ground is holy ground – a place where people can *expect* to encounter the transformative love of God. It is a recognition that all life can only find its true flourishing when it grows into participation in the life of God.

However, intercession also prompts us to honest diagnoses of situations. Intercessory prayer recognises that within this world, with all its potential and promise, all is not as it should be. We do, after all, have to pray for things. Intercession honestly recognises that creation is disordered, fallen and in need of redemption. It recognises the essential need for liberation which is all too visible in human structures and relationships which are closed in upon themselves. This was Martin Luther's masterful definition of sin – *incurvatus in se* – a double turning in, a closing in on oneself. Honest recognition prompts us to consider how the situations we intercede for can be opened up to the liberation of the Kingdom – of justice, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. So, as we intercede – as we place people and situations before God, and ask God to transform them – we are able to glimpse reality more clearly. Freed from delusion or idolatry, we are able to recognise creation's glory, which although fallen, is charged with promise when it recognises its ultimate dependance upon God's love.

And so my second category is *gathering*. A few moments ago, we saw how intercession is a priestly task, the vocalising of the Church's heart. Intercession gathers a wide variety of concerns and themes, of our own, our families, our friends and our world, and represents it all in prayer before God. When we intercede for someone or something, we stand *for* and *with* that person or situation. Intercessory prayer frees us from self-obsession, because it allows us to extend not sympathy or even empathy, but *love* to other people, perhaps in radically different situations from our own. As we bear others on our hearts, and therefore learn to love others better through this praying, we re-learn the truth that all are gathered together in Christ. Utterly disparate strands are gathered together in intercession to be woven into the pulse of prayer and worship which is the Church's vocalising of her heart's abundance.

When we consider the kind of gathering which intercession enables – ultimately a gathering of worship – we can see how our intercession is not really our own. It prays in union with the Risen Christ, and with the Communion of Saints, and in so doing it gathers all those situations and people for whom we pray more deeply *into that relationship with Christ*, in which we are implicated fully with each other.

And so, in our intercessory prayer we trust that those situations we name before God are brought into closer intimacy with Jesus Christ, and with God's purposes for the world which are embodied in him. Our intercessory prayer *changes* things. The third and final heading I want to consider then, is *qualitative transformation*. A story is told of an old man who used to pray silently in church for many hours every afternoon. One day, the parish priest walked in, and decided to ask the old man what he prayed for throughout all that time. "Oh", the man replied, "I just look at God, and God looks at me." When we place people or situations consciously before God, we are seeking to include them in that constantly expansive relationship of love which is God's own dynamism, so that they can be transformed in the extraordinary generative gaze between the Father and the Son. Therefore, all Christian prayer takes place in the Holy Spirit, which prompts us to address God as intimately as Jesus teaches us as "Abba, Father." It is this same Holy Spirit, St Paul teaches us, who intercedes for *us* "with sighs deeper than words" even before we have begun to pray. Therefore, the initiative for prayer is always God's, and the transformation we pray for – for others and ourselves – is also always God's. This means that although we may have wise insights into what might make any particular situation better, it also warns us against seeing intercessory prayer as simply a great prescription to tell God what God should be doing, and quite how God should be doing it!

Often, most of us fall into the trap of thinking that it's all a bit of a divine bargaining system– "if I pray a bit more like this, God might change his mind"; or perhaps like Aaron, "if I put this bit of incense over here, God might be persuaded to do something." No. There are lots of things which could be said about the strange rituals surrounding atonement in our first reading tonight, but the reason that Aaron is a successful intercessor in our first lesson is that he stands in what the writer of Numbers calls "the place between the living and the dead": that strange place of prayer where all things are possible because of God. Aaron dares to stand in the volatile ground of God's holiness. He is a successful intercessor because of how he occupies that intensely sacred ground where qualitative transformation is possible.

So the reason why the intercessor stands on sacred ground is because the place of intercession is a place where intimate relationships are re-ordered in the light of God's radical self-giving love. And this can be risky. Through the graced relationship of prayer, intercession seeks a different context for situations or people which need to be transformed through renewed *relationship with God*. It dares to place them, their values, their strife, their troubles, their longings, within the context of the Kingdom of God.

As a result of this link between our intercession and our receiving of the Kingdom of God, there can be no simple dividing line between our intercession and how we live our own lives. Just as much as the Church's prayer "springs from the abundance of the Church's heart" – Christ – our own hearts need to be shaped by Christ, and woven more deeply into the life of God. We need to pay attention to how our spiritual lives are formed by our encounters with Christ in the scriptures, and by the sanctification he offers us in the Eucharist. Recognition, Gathering and Qualitative Transformation are not abstract concepts. Our intercession should inform how we spend our lives, what we do with our money, which charities we support, how we pursue our relationships, how we conduct our debates in Church, how we spend our leisure time. As we intercede for others and for our world this rogation-tide, let us pray that our own hearts may be transformed as we seek, through the grace of the Spirit, to place others more deeply in the gaze between the Father and the Son. Let us attend to the abundance of our hearts, that our mouths may speak clearly, not just in our private and communal prayer, but that as we share in Christ's *own* priestly prayer for the world, the Kingdom might be proclaimed, and the world might believe.