

July 28, 2019 Pray For Me Homily: Clarence Darrow was arguably one of our nation's most renowned lawyers in the first half of the twentieth century. A rather controversial figure in his day, Darrow had enlisted many high profile cases. He is perhaps best remembered for representing two young men, actually older teenagers, Leopold and Loeb, who were arrested for kidnapping and killing a fourteen year old boy, James Franks. By all accounts, it was an open and shut case. Even the accused acknowledged their crimes. Darrow was surely at a disadvantage. But he had a strategy: the youth of the accused. They were not yet adults according to the law. His closing argument before the judge and jury lasted twelve hours. Not only did he mold public opinion but his argument was designed to soften the heart of the presiding judge. He appealed for mercy. And largely because of his efforts the two young men on trial, though convicted of the crimes, were spared the death penalty.

In Sacred Scripture, the supreme judge and the one to whom we make our appeals for mercy is God Himself.

What is particularly striking in today's first reading from the Book of Genesis is Abraham's intimacy with God. "See how I am presuming to speak with my Lord, though I am but dust and ashes". (Gen. 18:27) Abraham makes a plea for the doomed cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. He acts as their advocate. He is outspoken in the cause of justice. In scripture, Sodom symbolizes wickedness and evil. Even Our Lord Jesus Christ makes reference to the doomed city in his teaching. He declared: "For if the mighty deeds done in your midst had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom on the day of judgment than for you". (Mt. 11:23-24) The key question Abraham poses is whether the righteousness of a few men cannot win God's mercy for the whole group. It is the first example of intercessory prayer, or making a plea for others, in the scriptures. To quote the catechism of the Catholic Church: "Abraham's heart is attuned to his Lord's compassion for men and he dares to intercede with them with bold confidence".

We must never discount the power of a holy man or woman's prayer. We read in the book of proverbs: "The Lord is far from the wicked but he hears the prayers of the righteous". In the eminently Catholic prayer, the "Hail Mary" we implore the Blessed Mother to "pray for us sinners". In Jewish folklore, there is a wonderful anecdote about God's tender mercies:

The learned Rebbe, Baal Shem, asked his friend why the Almighty had not unleashed his fury on his own people for their many sins. He then offered a response to his own question. "Neither I nor you, nor the wise men, not the great spiritual leaders. Our prayers, our fasting were all in vain. We were saved by a woman, a woman of our people. This is how it happened. She came to the synagogue, tears running down her face, and addressed the almighty; 'Master of the universe, are you or are you not our Father? Why don't you listen to your children imploring you? You see, I am a mother. Children I have plenty of: five. And every time they shed a tear, it breaks my heart. But you Father, You have so many more. Every man is your child, and every one of them is weeping and weeping. Even if your heart is made of stone, how can you remain indifferent?'" And the rabbi concluded, "God decided she was right."

Because of the prayers of God's righteous, the world goes on and God does not destroy it. Back in the mid nineties, I celebrated daily Mass for a small religious community of cloistered Carmelite nuns in a bad section of Schenectady. The neighborhood was known for drug dealing, prostitution, street violence and graffiti. At the time, I often wondered if the prayers of the holy nuns inside the monastery restrained God's justifiable wrath.

So often in the past our prayers are requested by others who truly believe in its power and efficacy. Have we been faithful in honoring their request? To receive a request for prayers is a great honor. It means that the person making the request thinks highly of us, and is certain that God will hear our prayers for them.

At the end of the day, the words we pray fervently in the “Hail Mary” are consequential: “Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death”. The prayers of our mother in heaven carry such great weight!

Amen!