

## 66. *In the breach*

During the heat of the day, as the patriarch sat at the entrance of his tent, he looked up and saw three men, in reality Yahweh and two angels. He stood up, bowed low, and offered them hospitality. Then Yahweh renewed his promise to give him descendants, and disclosed to him that he was on his way to Sodom and Gomorrah to judge them.

Abraham then became the advocate of the criminal cities before God. His prayer, the first that we read in the Bible (cf. Gn 18:23-32), is a trusting, skillful, bold and pathetic intercession on behalf of the guilty. Abraham thus inaugurated the long line of intercessors who were to succeed one another in Israel from age to age.

About six centuries later, we might call Moses the prototype-intercessor. Weary of his people's unbelief, Yahweh declares to Moses: *"Let me alone, then, that my wrath may blaze up against them to consume them. Then I will make of you a great nation"* (Ex 32:10). From the first words, we understand that Moses is the one who *does not let God alone* to do as he pleases. Nor does Moses agree to break off relations with his people, even to receive a more glorious regency. He is the leader of these people by God's will, and so he will be their defender, their intercessor before the Lord himself.

Judges, kings and prophets, in the footsteps of Abraham and Moses, pleaded in their turn for this "stiff-necked" people and obtained mercy for them many times. But woe to the centuries when God found no intercessor: *"I have searched among them for someone who could build a wall or stand in the breach before me to keep me from destroying the land; but I found no one"* (Ezk 22:30).

Admire this portrait of the intercessor. He is the man who builds a rampart to protect his brothers, and keeps watch in the breach through which punishment might come.

Actually, all these intercessors of our Bible are but figures, rough drafts of the great and only Intercessor: Jesus Christ. Here is the man whom God is seeking. Standing in the breach, both arms outstretched, he intervenes. More effectively than Abraham, he pleads for the criminal world. And because he has united himself to human nature in the Incarnation—*et Verbum caro factum est*—human nature has been reconciled with the Father for all time.

Once and for all, Jesus Christ offered himself, and rebuilt the bridge between mankind and God. In a sense, his mission as an intercessor is completed. But it is equally true that he wants to continue his function of intercession on earth until the end of time. In order to accomplish this, he depends on us, his disciples. It is now our turn to remain in the breach, and keep watch. It is our turn to plead for the vast multitude of men and women everywhere, but first and in a special way for the people among whom it is our predestined mission to incarnate Christ and carry on his intercession.

Several times in my priestly life, I thought I discerned the Lord's strategy. In order not to turn away from a certain sinful family, from a certain dechristianized village, he raises up within them a prayerful person. And he blesses the place, the human group, where he has a beloved child. It may be a crippled young man, a humble peasant girl, or a poor country pastor afire with prayer.

The prayer of these intercessors is none other than Christ's own prayer. Otherwise it would be nothing. It is the prayer of Christ kindled within them by the Spirit of Christ, one of whose proper names is Paraclete: advocate, defender, intercessor. Undoubtedly, while the Holy Spirit pleads for those in whom he dwells, he also intercedes for all mankind in them and through them.

The glorious Christ, at the right hand of the Father, translates in heaven everything that all intercessors, inspired by the Spirit, ask in their deficient human language on earth. For the risen Lord lives and *never ceases interceding for us* (cf. 1 Jn 2:1; Heb 7:25).

Intercession is truly one of the great words in the vocabulary of prayer. It is a truly sublime function. It witnesses at once to a great love of God, and to a great love of men.