

Thirtieth Sunday of the year October 23, 2016

Sirach 35:12-14; 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14

God has blessed us abundantly and in plenty. He continues to pour out his abundant blessings on us. At the same time he invites to be close to him and pray to him. Prayer has a prominent place in the Christian religious practice. The liturgy of today discusses some aspects of prayer and its application to life. The readings tell us that God listens especially to the sinner and the humble. Often we wonder why God is partial in his dealing with human persons. In today's Gospel, Jesus tells us of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, the story that shows the way to being right with God. They both went to the privileged place to pray. Sometimes we think that God should be listening more to the good people who keep his laws rather than those who continuously break them. That was certainly the attitude of the Pharisee as indicated in the parable. Indeed the prayer of the humble pierces the clouds and it will not rest until it reaches its goal. The first reading taken from the Book of Sirach tells us that the prayer of the humble man will always be answered and the best prayer is that of willing loyal service. Sirach reminds us that God knows no favourites except towards the poor, the powerless and the oppressed. In the second reading we hear Paul telling us of the certainty of his death and his life is offered as an offering to God, a unique sacrifice. His life is being placed on the altar as a sacrifice to God and is convinced that the glorified Jesus will save him.

Today's First Reading taken from the Book of Sirach tells us of God's care for the lowly and their prayer reaches the courts of heaven. Those who serve the Lord can expect the Lord to heed to their prayers. The reading tells us that our prayer life is inevitably connected with the rest of our lives. The Lord is the judge, and within him there is no partiality. He will listen to the prayer of one who is wronged. The Lord will not ignore the supplication of the orphan, or the widow when they pour out their complaint to him. The ear of the Lord is inclined towards the needy, the poor, and those who are abandoned. The prayers of the faithful are pleasing to the Lord and are heard before His Heavenly Throne. But the prayers of the humble touch the Lord and they pierce His Heart until the Most High responds by executing judgment to bring justice to the righteous. Sirach speaks of prayer as an arrow reaching its mark where it remains until God takes note of it. The weak and the humble gain a hearing with God the Almighty. When speaking of humility, it is important to understand the proper meaning of this word. Genuine humility is the middle ground between being arrogant and having a false humility where a

person is not proud, nor self-assertive. The Lord calls his people to be humble and tells that true honesty reflects real humility which is pleasing to God.

In today's Second Reading from the Second Letter of Paul to Timothy, we find examples of Paul's humility. When Paul says that the time of his departure has come, he is stating the fact of his proximity of death. His death was imminent and his departure from this life and his return to Christ was certain. He was already in his prison and in chains in Rome. Through his words, he was not seeking pity, nor was he boasting of all he had done in the Holy Name of Jesus. On the other hand he had offered everything he had to God, his money, his scholarship, his work, his time and now his life. Paul now tells them that he has fought the good fight, he has run a good race, and he has kept the faith. Though Paul had Luke with him and he expected Timothy and Mark to come the place of his imprisonment, he feels abandoned much like Jesus. Nevertheless, Paul is very confident that Jesus is with him and will bring him safely to the heavenly kingdom. Comparing his life to that of a race, where a person looks for victory, Paul says that he had persevered and guarded the deposit of faith. The work that he had performed in his life time was not his work but the work of God that was manifested through him by the power of the Holy Spirit in the name of Jesus. Death for him is an act of worship, a libation, an act of freedom and a launching into eternity.

In today's Gospel we have the strange example of a Pharisee and a tax collector in the context of prayer. The Pharisee and we clearly have evidence to prove he is the "good" person. He carefully kept the Law of the Jews and the Commandments of God. He faithfully observed the obligations of a good Jew: he prayed, he fasted, and he gave alms. In fact he was very generous in his attitude towards God. He fasted twice a week while a religious Jew had to fast just once a year. The law commanded tithes of farm produce profits but the Pharisees tithed on everything he possessed. His righteousness considerably exceeded the standards prescribed by the Mosaic Law. And yet, God was not happy with him because he was a totally self-centred person. He thanked God with the words expressing that he was not like others, especially the terrible tax collector who had come to the Temple to pray. He was telling God how fortunate God is having secured such a pious generous person like the Pharisee. Indeed he was faithful in observing the laws and rituals. He had kept his commands. He was truly a religious person. He prayed, fasted, gave alms to the poor not because he loved God or anyone else. He performed all these religious acts because he loved himself and he was the centre of his entire existence. Even God for him was on the periphery. Jesus points to the defect of the Pharisee for not being aware that all these good things he claimed to

do have God as their source. Without God, he could do nothing, he would be nothing.

If we look at the tax collector as pictured in the Gospel and he is certainly a sinner. The Tax collectors were considered as social outcasts. They were considered as robbers for Rome. The tax collectors collected tax money from their own community that was oppressed by the Romans and kept a good share for them. Here we have one such who did not observe the Jewish law. Like any other tax collector, he too was a swindler and extortionist. He really was a sinner before the world but God loved him and continued to love him. Jesus says that when the tax collector left the Temple, he did so as a friend of God, whereas the Pharisee went away without the experience of forgiveness. The Parable tells us that even though the tax collector was a sinner, he confessed his sins and sought forgiveness from God. Expressing his unworthiness he prayed to God and asked him to show his mercy to him a sinner. God comes to his help and grants him the gift of pardon. St John tells us that if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves. Our faith tells us that one of the greatest gifts is for us, the followers of Jesus is to know our sinfulness. The tax collector certainly knew what he was and the purpose of his visit to the Temple, namely to receive forgiveness, while the Pharisee was unable to understand the real purpose of his prayer.

The ordinary interpretation of this parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector takes its cue from the opening verse. It is addressed to those who are convinced of their own righteousness and despise everyone else. The parable itself uses the characters of a Pharisee and a tax collector but the message is not directed especially against either the Pharisee or the tax collector as such. Most of those who read the parable are conditioned to criticize the Pharisee as a proud, self-righteous, egoistic person and praise the tax collector as a humble person. In fact the Pharisee is not self-righteous and he does what a good Pharisee is supposed to do. The tax collector on the other hand was a collaborator with the enemies of the land. The mistake of the Pharisee is that he seems to credit his religious and personal success to himself. If he is praying, the words seem to be directed towards him. The tax collector simply asks for mercy, having admitted that he was a sinner. In spite of this many in the audience of Jesus would have expected God's grace should go to the Pharisee and would have been shocked to hear the justification of the tax collector. Indeed we are not the judges of who is justified and who is not. Forgiveness and justification is a divine gift which God bestows on his chosen ones. What is expected of us is the submission of the tax collector and awaits mercy of God.

Luke in today's Gospel tells us that no matter who we are, the only authentic prayer any of us can utter, is the one voiced by the tax collector. Even then there is no guarantee of righteousness. Here Jesus speaks of simplicity and humility. He says that all who humble themselves will be exalted. In the Gospel of Matthew we have the words of Jesus that whoever becomes humble like the little child is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. In the Parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, we heard how the Pharisee considered himself as righteous and condemned the tax collector. St Peter his letter tells us that all of us must clothe ourselves with humility in our dealings with one another, for 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.' Therefore we must humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God, so that He may exalt us in due time. Again Paul speaking to the Colossians says that as God's chosen ones, we must clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Thus as Christians, we are called to humble ourselves as Jesus humbled Himself. Jesus manifested his great love for each and every one of us through his great act of humility.

During his life on earth we do not hear any harsh word of Jesus except against the Pharisees. Jesus did mix with them yet he spoke strongly of their behaviour. In Matthew a full chapter is devoted to Christ's condemnation of Pharisees and Scribes. He calls them white washed sepulchres, persons who form laws but not observe and so on. In the parable of today he speaks of them as self-righteous persons. One thing we learn is that while God approves of no sin, his mercy and forgiveness is available for all sinners who in humility turn to him. For it is only the Mercy of God, given as a gift to us for our sincerity, which brings us into His presence, bringing us salvation, for our God is merciful and He loves mankind. "The humble man's prayer pierces the clouds... The Lord will not be slow in coming," says today's First Reading. As a practical note we must realize that the virtue of humility is essential in our daily lives. By placing ourselves above all others, in truth, we are displeasing the Lord. When we manifest our pride, the end result will be that we will be among the last. If we practice humility in our daily lives supporting praising and encouraging others we will receive favourable graces from the Lord. The Lord God shall indeed exalt us because of our genuine humility. As we live our Christian lives we ask the Holy Spirit to teach us true humility so we may always be pleasing to the eyes of God.

One thing that we can learn from this sad story of the Pharisees is that while God approves of no sin, his mercy and his forgiveness is available to all sinners except the proud. It is not that God will not forgive the sin of pride but that the proud man will not ask for God's forgiveness. Therefore we must be on guard against this

dangerous and destructive vice. It is dangerous because it can destroy us once it enters into our life. It is destructive because it destroys all good virtues we practice and all the good works we do. Charity or brotherly love cannot flourish in a proud heart, for a proud heart is so full of self, that it has no room for others. No true love of God can exist in a proud heart because a proud person practices religion and virtues for his self glory and not for God. The Pharisee in the parable proves this fact. He only boasted of his good works and did not pray at all. Further he spent his time criticizing the person next to him and refused to accept as his own brother. He called himself better than other persons around him.

Each of today's readings teaches us something about how we should pray and live our religious life. From Sirach, that our prayer must be connected with the rest of our lives, especially our conduct towards the powerless. From Jesus we learn that our prayer must be humble and pleasing to God. St Paul tells us that our entire life itself is prayer and we offer to God all we have including our lives. A good life like a good player comes from emptying ourselves of ourselves to let God in. that means a realization of the truth we totally depend on God and his strength which comes through prayer. An awareness of our sins, too, can help us in our lives to be far more compassionate and understanding towards others in their sinfulness and weakness. In the depths of our sinfulness we must never lose sight of the God who is always standing by ready to come at our merest signal. We must also realize that all good gifts come from God and our humility requires that we give God credit for them and share them with others.

Bill was a notorious and troublesome boy in the class. The Teacher was always finding it hard to control him and it was disturbing the whole class. She was sad. One day as the boy entered the class he found the teacher writing something in shorthand and the boy asked her out of curiosity, what she was writing. She told him quietly that it was a prayer. The boy asked her whether God knows short hand and she said God knows everything and reads every heart. As she looked at the board the boy took the letter and hid it in his book. After several years when Bill was a successful man when he looked through his past materials found this note and out of curiosity took it to the office to translate. The clerk told him that the note said: Dear God I am finding difficult to control Bill and he disturbs me. Please touch his heart. He is capable and he can be very good or very evil. Bill had tears in his eyes. He knew the prayers of his teacher were heard. He warmly remembered his teacher who had prayed for him and for his conversion.

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