

30th Sunday in Ordinary time C/2007

We all have experienced the feeling of self-satisfaction after a well accomplished duty or undertaking. The feeling of self-satisfaction can raise an awareness of our abilities and encourages our self-esteem. In the life of religion, however, it can bring some to think that they deserve a reward from God for their accomplishments, or that those who do not act like them have nothing to claim before God.

It is such an attitude today's readings are denouncing by showing us the right stand we have to take before God and before one another. In the first reading, Sirach reminds us that God is an impartial judge, who knows no discrimination or favorites. He listens to the plea of the oppressed and does not ignore the orphan's supplication nor the widow's cry. Because he is open to all without distinction, God is moved by the petitions of the poor and the humble. For that, the prayer of the one who comes to him with humility and sincerity of heart, and without boasting about his merits is more favorable than that of the self-righteous.

To illustrate such a truth, the Gospel gives us the example of the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. First of all, it is better to realize that the Gospel does not say that the Pharisee was a bad guy or unfaithful to his religious commitments. With regard to the respect of the Law, he was a model and exemplary. He was honest in his life; he was able to fast regularly and to tithe without looking at his problems. In the same way, the Gospel does not say that the tax collector was a holy man or a pious gentleman.

But, how does it come that the prayer of the first is not accepted while the second is justified? Here lies the point of the parable. There is no doubt that in the eyes of his contemporaries, the Pharisee was a righteous man and the tax collector a crooked one. The problem, however, is that in spite of his moral integrity, the Pharisee took a wrong stand before God. What does it mean?

In fact, the Pharisee went to the temple with the list of all his good deeds with the conviction that these will merit him justification. It is as though he wanted to tell God to look at all that he has done and to give him a prize. But in reality, what can we present to God as good deeds in order to win a prize? All our good deeds put together cannot lay any claim to salvation, because salvation is a gratuitous gift of God brought to us through the incarnation, the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

For that reason, anybody performing any good deed cannot merit anything in the sight of God, he can only be thankful to the Lord that he has helped him remain faithful and on the right path. The more we are aware of the grace the Lord gives us to belong to him, the more we can be but humble, modest and indebted to God for what he does for us in spite of our unworthiness and sinfulness.

That is also the reason why the tax collector was justified, not on account of his deeds, but on the confession of his sins before God. He knew the whole truth about himself and in the name of that truth he could but kneel, beat his breast,

and ask forgiveness. Not possessing anything to claim, he came before God with empty hands. He was aware that he could only offer his brokenness and sinfulness. And his prayer was accepted.

All that helps us understand how we have to present ourselves before God in our prayers, not with self-boasting merits, but with humility and surrendering to God's mercy. It is the prayer of the humble that pierces the clouds. No one who is proud can pray correctly. The gate of heaven is so low that in order to enter it we have to kneel. No one who despises others can really pray in the spirit of Jesus. The reason is that if we are sincere with ourselves, we can only realize that we are all sinners like any other, and for that we need God's mercy upon us. True prayer consists in setting our lives next to the life of God. When we do that, we can only realize how sinful we are. Convinced by such a truth, we can but beat our breast and ask forgiveness before the Most High.

Another thing we learn from the Gospel is the image of God the Pharisee had in mind. By praising his own deeds in his prayer, the Pharisee considers God as an accountant, a giver of a prize. Such a way of basing religion on merits has only one result, namely to separate people from one another, making a distinction between the good and the bad, and despising the others. That is why the Pharisee said in his prayer that he was not like the tax collector and, thereby, he separated himself from him. If God keeps both of us together, good and bad, why shall we build a wall between us? Why shall we despise those who are not like us?

When the parable ends with the words, "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted", it consecrates the truth that it is only when we come before God empty-handed, like a poor person and a debtor, that he can fill us with his gifts. Any time we forget it, we behave like the self-righteous Pharisee who was boasting about his merits and despised the others, and we gain nothing.

We find in the life of St. Paul a good example of sincere prayer and true attitude before God, as we heard in the second reading. With sincerity and humility, Paul recognizes what he was capable to do for the sake of Jesus. In spite of tribulations and persecutions, he competed well and kept his faith intact. What else can he expect, now that he is at the end of his life, than a crown promised to the humble and the faithful? That crown awaits not only him, but all who wait with expectation for the coming of our Lord, Jesus Christ, the right judge of the world. Let us compete then, my friends, with trust and confidence in God until the last minute of our life, keeping our faith alive. May God bless us and teach each one of us so that we approach God in our prayers with humility and sincerity of heart!

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



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