

Thirtieth Sunday in Ord. Time C/2013

The readings of this Sunday talk about the right spirit of prayer. They show that the right prayer that touches the heart of God is that which comes out of a humble and sincere heart. They invite us in particular to open up to God with humility and sincerity.

The first reading affirms that God is an impartial judge who knows no favorites. However, though impartial, he listens with open ears to the cry of the oppressed, the orphan and the widow. Moreover, the prayer of the one who serves him with sincerity and humility finds grace before him.

What is behind this text is the idea that God does not act with discrimination in his judgment toward human beings. He loves each one of them in the same way. Another truth is that God is sensitive to those who suffer and are humble before him.

This text allows us to understand what is at stake in today's Gospel as Jesus talks about the parable of the prayer of the Pharisee and the tax collector. First of all, the Gospel says that Jesus addressed this parable to those who were convinced of their righteousness and despised everyone else. In order to apply the parable to the reality, Jesus tells the story of a Pharisee and tax collector who went to pray in the temple.

While the Pharisee was full of self-righteousness before God for his spiritual merits, the tax collector, humbled by his sinfulness, kept asking God forgiveness for his sins. For Jesus, the outcome of those two prayers was very different. While the tax collector was justified and forgiven, the Pharisee was not. The Gospel finishes with Jesus' statement saying that whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted.

What do we learn from this Gospel? Today I want to talk about praying in the spirit of Jesus. First of all, let me say that when we read the Gospel, we see that Jesus was used to going up the mountains to pray alone. Even when at times he took some of his disciples with him, he always prayed by himself, in intimate relationship with his Father.

By appreciating the prayer of the tax collector over that of the Pharisee, Jesus recognizes in his approach, the way he himself addresses his Father in prayer, that is, with humility, sincerity and the spirit of dependence upon his bounty. That spirit is what he wants us to have in our own prayer.

However, we have to bear in mind that the Gospel does not say that the Pharisee was a bad man or unfaithful to his religious duties. On the contrary, he was a good one. In the same way, the Gospel does not say that the tax collector was a saint, because in truth he was not.

The appreciation our Lord gives to the prayer of the tax collector comes from the fact that he did not hide his situation before God or before men. In a gesture of humility and sincerity, he wanted nothing more than to be forgiven of his many sins. He knew that he had nothing to boast for. He knew the whole truth about himself and his life, namely that he was a big sinner. In the name of that truth he could only but kneel before God, beat his breast, and ask for forgiveness. We need also in our prayer the recognition of our mistakes before our fellows and the confession of our sins before God.

This is very important for our relationship with God, because there is a tendency to think that we are saints in so far as we have not killed, stolen or committed adultery. That was the illusion of the Pharisee too. He thought he was a saint. He went to the temple with a list of all the good things he has done in his life with the conviction that these would merit him justification. It is as though he wanted to tell God about all those things so that he gives him a prize. It is as though someone went to confession in order to tell God how good and faithful he is. That is why we should never forget the truth of the psalm 130 that reminds us of the fact that we are all sinners before God.

By acting this way, the Pharisee considers God as an accountant whose task is to reward those who have a good record with him. But, such a way of acting has also a negative effect. In fact, when someone considers himself as the best of the best, it is likely that he will despise those who are not like him. That is the reason why the Pharisee said in his prayer that he was not like the tax collector who, according to his judgment, belonged to the bad guys.

Moreover, as human experience has taught us, when someone considers himself as the best, he tends to separate himself from those, he thinks, who do not act like him. In that perspective, all his efforts aim not only at maintaining a separation between him and others, but also at making a distinction between the bad guys and the good guys to whom he belongs. And yet, God loves us all in the same way, with compassion and mercy. He keeps us all together, good and bad alike. He lets his son arise on the bad and the good alike. He lets his rain fall on the bad and the good alike. If he could judge us according to our sins, who would survive?

What I am saying here does not justify anybody so that the sinners remain in their sins under the pretext that God is merciful toward them. No; we all have to convert from our sins so that each one looks for the way of pleasing God by following his commandment. Moreover, we should not laugh at the mercy of God who gives us the time to repent and to come back to him. In that sense, to dwell in sin and not feel the urgency of conversion is a big mistake.

That is why the more we are aware of God's grace and mercy, the more we have to be humble and confess our sins. As someone said, 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. Whoever does not strive to change his life cannot enter it.

When Jesus says that "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted", he is inviting us to recognize the truth of our life and come before God, not in boasting because of our merits, but with empty hands and our misery so that he may heal us. Let us pray, then, that God may help us to repent of our sins and to pray in the spirit of Jesus.

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



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