

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time C/2016

The readings of this Sunday talk about the importance of prayer. They show that God listens to the cry of those who call upon him. They invite us to address God in our prayers with a spirit of abasement, humility and confession of our weaknesses.

The first reading talks about God's justice towards human beings. It shows that God's justice is without partiality. It also shows that though God is impartial, he, however, listens willingly to the cries of the oppressed, orphans, widows and the lowly.

What is behind this text is the idea that God is a just judge. There is also the idea that God hears the cries of the poor. The last idea is related to the truth that the supplication of the lowly finds grace before God.

This text allows us to understand the stakes of today's Gospel in which Jesus talks about the right attitude in prayer. First of all, the Gospel starts with a parable that Jesus told about those who are convinced of their righteousness and despise others. It describes the case of a Pharisee and a tax collector who went in the temple for prayer.

It describes how the Pharisee, full of himself, boasted of his merits in his prayer while the tax collector, aware of his many sins, asked God pardon and mercy. After that, the Gospel reports the remark of Jesus recalling that God heard the prayer of the tax collector and not that of the Pharisee. The Gospel ends up with Jesus' statement, namely that whoever exalts himself will be humbled and the one who humbles himself will be exalted.

What do we learn from today's Gospel? Today, I want to talk about the true spirit of prayer. What do I mean by that? Let me explain. In fact, as human beings, we are very different according to our nature and character. Some are shy, others are outspoken. Some are thoughtful and considerate in whatever they do. Others do not care at all about what they say or do and the consequence all that can bear on people around them.

In spite of our differences, however, there is something we have in common, namely the dignity of being human. It is that dignity that is at the origin of the pride we all have or show at one time or another of our life.

Pride is not always negative because it enhances our self-esteem. However, pride can blind us about our own value and lead us to belittle others. In that sense, it can lead some people to be narcissistic, arrogant or condescending. Because pride is above all a trait of character, it can affect even the way we pray as we see in the case of the prayer of the Pharisee.

There is no doubt that the Pharisee of the Gospel seems to be a good religious man. Not only does he respect the Law, but he also fasts and pays tithes. But, does it entitle him to belittle the tax collector or to think that he is better than him? After all, what was the reason why he went in the temple? Was it to pray or to compare himself to the tax collector?

In truth, by boasting about himself and what he does, the Pharisee considers God as a merchant with whom he has to bargain. It is like saying to God: "You see how much I respect the Law, pay me for that". Or, "because that tax collector is not respectful of the

Law, do not give him what he is asking in his prayer". I believe that is the reason why he is displaying his good deeds so that God may reward him for them.

I also believe that is the reason why his prayer was not heard, because the Church is not the place where we go in order to display our deeds or to point fingers on others, be they bad persons or not. In truth, we go to church with the idea of humbly opening our heart to God and letting him speak to us through the Holy Scriptures so that we become better persons. Any prayer that ignores this requirement is wrong.

In that sense, when Jesus says that the prayer of the tax collector was heard, he does not assume that his life was exemplary. What he wants to tell us is that any good relationship with God starts with the recognition of our unworthiness before him. It is for that reason that we start each Mass with the Confiteor in order to ask God forgiveness for our sins and make us worthy of him.

In other words, our spiritual state before God has to be rooted in seeking the mercy of God and not in boasting about our good deeds. If we do the contrary, that is a sign that we have not understood that everything we are is by God's grace and mercy. That is why it is not spiritually lifting in approaching God with the idea of boasting about our merits.

That is the trap in which the Pharisee has fallen. Instead of being open to God in prayer, he is caught up in himself, convinced of his righteousness as he was. For those who were looking at him, they thought that he was caught up in prayer, but in reality he was not giving thanks to God as much as he was delighting in himself. He did not ask God for mercy. In his eyes, he did not need God's mercy because he was too good. In the end, he left the temple as he got in, without anything except his spiritual arrogance.

Unlike the Pharisee, the tax collector is aware of his many sins. He does not dare lift his eyes to heaven. What he needs is just one thing, namely God's mercy. And, as he asked for mercy, he received mercy. In the same way, when we come to Church seeking God's mercy, we leave the Church living under his mercy.

The tax collector, indeed, teaches us that what God wants of us is our conversion of heart. That is why when we meet people who say that they have done unforgivable things in their life, we have to tell them the story of the tax collector. To those who say that they cannot go into a Church because they are convinced that they do not belong there, let us tell them that God loves them and forgives them, as he did with the tax collector. After all, "God is infinitely better at loving than we are at sinning."

Let us, then, approach God in our prayer with humility and trust. Let us ask him to forgive us our sins. Let us call upon him so that he gives us a spirit of humility and self-abasement. God bless you all!

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



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