

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time C2022

The readings of last Sunday provided us with the way of praying in the presence of God, that is, with persistence, patience and perseverance, like Moses and the widowed woman. Today's readings complete the vision of last week by insisting on the interior attitude of the one who prays.

First of all, an assurance is given us that God answers always the prayers of those who call upon him. In his judgment, he is just and has no favorites. However, though fair and without favoritism, God is touched by the cry of the weak and the oppressed; his ears are open to the wail of the lowly, the orphan and the widow.

Why is it so? It is so because those poor people, without resources or human support, are more vulnerable and sincere before God than the self-confident who are full of themselves and prideful. In their impoverishment and humility, they have no merits to boast for than to rely on God's mercy and forgiveness. For that reason, the prayer of the one who comes to God with sincerity of heart, and without boasting about his own merits, is more favorable than that of the self-righteous.

That is why in the Gospel Jesus contrasts the self-sufficiency of the Pharisee with the sincerity of the tax collector in their prayer before God. For sure, we all have experienced one day or another the feeling of self-satisfaction after a well accomplished task or duty.

In some people, the feeling of self-satisfaction can raise an awareness of their abilities and encourages their self-esteem. However, in other people it can lead them to arrogance and self-righteousness. They can even think that they deserve a reward from God for their achievements; that they are better than the average people who are not like them, or have no qualities comparable to what they possess. This is exactly the example we have in the prayer of the Pharisee and the tax collector.

As you can see, the Gospel does not say that the Pharisee was a bad guy or unfaithful to his religious commitments. On the contrary, he was very respectful of the Law; he was a model and exemplary person. He was honest in his life; he was able to fast regularly and to tithe without any hesitation. 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 that of the second is received by God? Here lies the point of the parable. There is no doubt that in the eyes of his fellow citizens, 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 is it that?

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. This episode challenges us seriously and right now as we have come to this Sunday Mass. How have you come this morning before God?

Anyone performing any good deed cannot boast before God; he can only be thankful to the Lord that he has given him the grace to remain faithful and on the right path. The more we are aware of the graces of God in our lives, 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.

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 his fellows can pray in the spirit of Jesus.

If we are sincere with ourselves, we can only realize that we are sinners like anybody, and for that reason we need God's mercy upon us. True prayer consists in setting our lives next to the life of Jesus. 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.

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, that he can fill us with his gifts. In the same way that it is only when a glass is empty that it can be filled with water so God fills us with his graces when we come before him empty-handed. Any time we forget this truth, there is a risk of behaving like the self-righteous Pharisee who was boasting about his merits and despised the tax collector.

On this World Day Mission, let us pray that all the preachers of the Word of God will be filled with the Holy Spirit so that they lead a life of sincerity and transparency before God and their fellow human beings. God bless you!

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



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Contact: www.mbala.org
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