

27th October 2019 (30th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C)

Ecclesiasticus 35:12-14,16-19; Psalm 33(34):2-3,17-19,23; 2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18; Luke 18:9-14.

'God, be merciful to me, a sinner.'

What is the relationship between faith and prayer? Faith is our response to God's loving invitation to participate in his life; prayer is the way we express our faith. In human relations, my love for a particular person becomes very visible in the way I relate and talk to that person. If every time I meet the other person I am angry at her/him, then I am scarcely expressing!

Over the past Sundays, the gospel according to Luke has been encouraging us to approach God with our prayers and to pray constantly – day and night. While formal and recited prayers are important, this is only a small part of our prayer life. Prayer expresses my love and relationship to God.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus uses a very simple parable to show us what it means to pray: two men go to the temple to pray. One of the men, a Pharisee, turns his prayer into an exercise of self-praise. Some Pharisees considered themselves to be 'holy people' who did their very best to uphold, in their minutest detail, all the traditions, rules and regulations given in the Old Testament. What the Pharisee does not realise is that his ability to live a good life is itself a God's gift. We do not obey the commandments in order to pay for our salvation, but in gratitude for being saved. God loves us and invites us to love him back, we do this each time we successfully accept and live his word.

The Pharisee falls into the trap of thinking he has the right to judge people around him who, according to him, do not live a holy life like he does. This attitude is in itself 'sinful' and to be avoided. Only God can judge and reward us according to our intentions, actions and omissions; I can never take the place of God!

Although when we read today's gospel story it is easy for us to understand that the Pharisee is doing the wrong thing, we often fall into the same trap. We think that by coming to Church on Sunday, praying the rosary, doing adoration and spending long hours in prayer, we are more pleasing to God than our sister or brother who has not been to our church services for a long time. If we look carefully at ourselves we will realise that we often take on God's role and judge whether another person is justified or not.

We may look at the divorced people and condemn them, not realising that the marriage they were living in was causing damage to their young children. We send the mother who committed abortion to hell, without noticing the deep remorse she still carries in her heart. We judge the drug addict, without having time to listen to her/his story and her/his cry for help.

God has more time for those who recognise their sins and cry out to him for forgiveness. The poor publican, whose job was to collect taxes in order to support his family, came in front of God, not even daring to lift up his face, and asked for mercy. Jesus tells us that he received the gift of mercy and forgiveness, because he asked for it; the Pharisee did not! God is not concerned with who best follows traditions and laws, but is concerned with people who have faith. Some of us can never reach the level of holiness required by law, and, recognising this, they put all their trust in God.

The Pharisee's mistake is not that he followed the law faithfully, but that he made himself God! He thought that by his good and holy actions, by going beyond what is expected of him, he could buy God's favour. Worse still, he goes in front of God not to ask for his mercy, but to boast with God about his goodness. In his pride, the Pharisee informs God that he does not really need him and his mercy, as he is a good person and can do it on his own; poor man!

Like a generous, merciful, forgiving father, God waits for us to run to him in all our failings and beg him to reach out and lift us up from our sinfulness. Regardless of how holy we feel ourselves to be, and how often we may obey God's law, we always need God's forgiveness and we always need to be grateful for it.

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