
OCTOBER 27, 2019

Sunday of the 30th Week of Ordinary Time

Year C

Sir 35:15b-17,20-22a

Ps 34:2-3,17-19,23

2 Tm 4:6-8,16-18

Lk 18:9-14

The teaching of the sage Ben Sirach, heir to the age-old prophetic doctrine of justice and God's preferential love for the poor and the oppressed, leads us to the summits of true biblical spirituality. Deuteronomy warned that God "has no favorites [and] accepts no bribes" (Dt 10:17), as opposed to people, who play favorites based on social, racial, or ideological prejudices at the expense of the lives of the humble. This doctrine was applied broadly by Jesus in his preaching and his work of liberation, as well as by the apostles and evangelists, who featured it in their writings and spread it universally. God, in his infinite mercy, never fails to be present to all those who, aware of their own faults and weaknesses, seek his help and forgiveness. The proud, however, he allows to wander confused in the haughty thoughts of their hearts.

Jesus' parable about the tax collector and the Pharisee demonstrates his way of seeing people, which is God's way of seeing people. He does not judge by appearances, nor according to prejudices, but by what he sees with clarity in the depths of the human heart, discerning the true motivation that generates people's actions and their prayers.

In fact, in the Gospels we first encounter the idea that God has no favorites on the lips of Jesus' adversaries, who, though they were plotting against him, had to publicly acknowledge his perfect moral integrity, saying,

“Teacher, we know that what you say and teach is correct, and you show no partiality, but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth” (Lk 20:21; see Mt 22:16). This is the path of God, which Jesus practiced and taught. It is a practice he demonstrated not only in his approach to humble people and those who were excluded and marginalized because they were judged to be sinners, such as prostitutes and publicans, or the impure and accursed, such as lepers, but also in all his work of evangelization, breaking down all barriers of discrimination, whether religious, social, or racial. Jesus, in fact, agreed to listen to the humble request of the Roman centurion and went to his house to heal his servant. Moreover, in his continuous travels as an itinerant Teacher, he visited the Samaritan region and often praised its inhabitants. Going into the pagan territories, he reached the region of Tyre and healed the daughter of a Syro-Phoenician woman. Crossing to the other side of Lake Tiberias, he headed towards the Decapolis and healed people afflicted by various diseases. His repeated crossings of the Sea of Galilee demonstrate Jesus’ lordship over reality, symbolically represented by the sea; he is able to calm its menacing strength and walk over its abyss. The terrifying sea, a negative symbol, no longer functions as a force of separation, but becomes a bridge, and through the ministry of Jesus, it serves as a path toward the reconciliation of the two parts, the Jewish and the pagan.

In the synagogue of Nazareth, where he had presented the program of his ministry, Jesus had challenged his listeners on Israel’s position with regard to the other peoples considered chosen by God. In fact, those present had reacted negatively, condemning his statement about the fulfillment of the prophecies. The examples of Elijah, who was sent to the Phoenician widow, and Elisha, who healed the Syrian leper Naaman, were sufficient to show that God doesn’t play favorites; all creatures are precious in his eyes. As the psalmist says, the Lord is good to all, and his tenderness embraces every creature. He is close to all those who sincerely call upon him. The psalmist does not mention any specific race or nationality, nor status or color of skin. If the love of God permeates all creatures, it is because they are all

his work and, therefore, his is a universal love, full of care for all human beings, without any discrimination.

This does not negate the fact that Israel was chosen by God to enter a special covenant with him. But this election was a function of a specific mission for the good of all peoples, reflecting the presence of the living God in history as the liberator of the oppressed and savior of the human person in all its reality:

You are my witnesses – oracle of the LORD –
 my servant whom I have chosen
 To know and believe in me
 and understand that I am he.
 Before me no god was formed,
 and after me there shall be none. (Is 43:10)

God, in fact, has not only chosen his servant but has also formed and instructed him:

I, the LORD, have called you for justice,
 I have grasped you by the hand;
 I formed you, and set you
 as a covenant for the people,
 a light for the nations,
 To open the eyes of the blind,
 to bring out prisoners from confinement,
 and from the dungeon, those who live in darkness. (Is 42:6-7)

Looking more closely at the teaching of Jesus in his parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee in the Temple, we realize that the difference between the two is precisely what is found in the human heart, laid bare by the presence of God in prayer.

In any case, it is with the intention of praying that the tax collector and the Pharisee go to the Temple, thus finding themselves sharing for a few moments the same sacred place. But the particular way each of them will go about their prayer is what will determine their respective destiny and final spiritual state. The tax collector, having had the humility and sincerity to recognize his unworthiness and sin and to implore God's forgiveness, returns home a better man, transformed inwardly, reconciled. In response to his authentic prayer, divine grace is not withheld. Once again, we learn the truth that "everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted" (Lk 18:14b).

On the other hand, the Pharisee is a prisoner in his tower of spiritual pride. Too aware of his own meritorious works and of the excellence of his socio-religious class, he believes himself superior and better than all the others, erecting barriers between himself and them, insulting them and despising them. He was perhaps good and pious up to that moment, but the attitude he shows reveals the arrogance in his heart, undermining his alleged virtue from within.

Moreover, we do not approach God in the Temple in order to celebrate and contemplate ourselves in a self-referential pose, looking down at others from above. We stand before God for an encounter of love, and to meet others in him. In this sense, prayer is contemplation of the Lord, a celebration of the wonders that his grace works every day in the bosom of human frailty, and of his indefatigable mercy that lifts up those who have fallen and who want to get up again.

Listening to this parable, the immediate temptation would be to identify ourselves with the tax collector, simply because he occupies the positive place in the story. It's a sign of the subtle human desire to get rid of our conscience. But the parable invites us to look inward to remove all sense of self-sufficiency and contempt for others, in order to find a simple, humble, and fraternal heart that knows how to look upon oneself and upon others with a merciful and hopeful gaze. In this regard, it is often necessary to

question the way we pray. What does it reveal to us about the depth and quality of our hearts? What does it reveal to us about ourselves, about the way we relate to others and the way we perceive them spontaneously in relation to us? What does it reveal to us about our relationship with God and his salvation?

Pope Francis constantly reminds us of the centrality of prayer in relation to the Church and its mission. Prayer is the soul of mission, for the efficacy of one's personal encounter with Christ, the right measures of one's relationship with oneself and with the world in the light of the Holy Spirit, are at the root of the experience of truth that saves. The missionary disciple, thanks to prayer, always includes himself among those in need of the salvation that he is called to announce and, in the sacraments, to communicate. What is certain is that the mission of evangelization entrusted to us as a Church could not be conducted in truth if we adopted a domineering attitude in the ways we relate to others, confident and convinced of our own moral and religious superiority. Mission must be a humble proposal of friendship with Christ, with a profound respect for the religious freedom of the men and women of our age, for their cultures, and for their history. True humility is never the absence of truth. It is rather an effective presence of a truth that judges, forgives, and saves those who proclaim it and those who hear it proclaimed.

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