

Pharisaic merit versus Publican mercy

30th Sunday of the Year – Cycle C – 27 October 2019

Readings: Sir 35:12-14, 16-18; 2 Tim 4:6-8, 16-18; Lk 18:9-14

“*God, be merciful to me, a sinner!*” (Lk 18)

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. The first reading from Sirach or Ecclesiasticus is chosen since it corresponds to, and complements, today’s Gospel passage. This passage is from ‘Biblical wisdom literature’ that deals with commonplace problems and commonsense truths dealing with Life. Today’s focus is on sincere prayer to God—who is both just and merciful to those who call on God’s name. There are a few striking statements in this passage that prepare us for the Gospel; for instance, God “will listen to the prayer of one who is wronged” (v.16) and “will not ignore the supplication of the orphan or the widow when she pours out her complaint” (v.17). In the Biblical tradition, God preferentially loves the poor, the *anawim*, marked by some ‘less’ which makes them weak and vulnerable. The widow is husbandless, the orphan, parentless, and the alien or stranger, friendless. God will unfailingly step in to protect, defend and specially love these sections of society.
2. The gospel passage with the so-called ‘Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican’ (tax-collector) is only found in the gospel according to Luke, specially addressed to the poor and the weak whom God loves very much. The two ‘main characters’—Pharisee and tax collector—are not only two individuals but also represent two contrary orientations: the proud vs. the humble, ego-inflating vs. self-effacing, those boasting about their own merit vs. those begging for God’s mercy, respectively. Gauged from a purely legalistic and logical viewpoint, the Pharisees self-assessment is 100% true. He is, indeed, an extremely disciplined, scrupulous devotee who prays, fasts, and pays temple taxes, which everyone ought to be doing! In his own words, he is certainly “not like this tax collector.” What is problematic, however, is that the Pharisee’s praying is actually a form of ‘preying’ whereby he focuses not on God, but on himself—raising himself up and pushing others down—in order to assume a holier-than-thou aura, which makes him classify and condemn, differentiate and denigrate. He thanks God that: “I am not like other people” who all belong to some category: thieves, rogues, adulterers and tax-collectors (all sinners!) Basically, I am good, they are bad; I am pure, they, impure, and so on.
3. Unlike Jesus’ other parables that are symbolic and often indicative of the end-times, this parable is simple and direct. Jesus gives a simple, unambiguous message: *Be* like the tax collector; who focuses not on his own merit (*punya*, in the Indic tradition) but rather on his sin (*paap*), and on the overwhelming wellspring of God’s mercy, which washes away each and every sin. Notably, just like the Pharisee, the tax collector is also very correct in his self-evaluation, for, he *is* undoubtedly a ‘sinner’ according to the moral standards of that time. By collecting all kinds of taxes and tolls from his own people, the Jews, lining his own pockets, and handing money over to the Roman government, he was betraying his people. Jews understandably hated tax collectors. Yet, his prayer, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner,” has the ring of true penitence and is a poignant plea for pardon. Here is

someone totally dependent not on human merit but on God's mercy and magnanimity. Jesus declares, "This man went home justified rather than the other" (v.14).

Linking the Psalm and the 2nd Reading to the Theme:

In tune with the first reading, the responsorial psalm too is a wisdom psalm (34) with the response being: "*This poor soul called; the Lord heard him*" (v.6) wherein, from verses 11-22 the psalmist offers instructions very similar to the style of the wisdom teachers about the characteristics of the virtuous life.

In the second reading taken from Paul's 2nd letter to Timothy, Paul laments: "All have deserted me" referring to the Roman Christians who did not stand by him in his trials. But, he asserts: "The Lord stood by me" and knows for sure that he will attain "the crown of righteousness." Paul, like the tax collector, is aware of his own sinfulness and his wasted years as persecutor of the Church. However, in this kind of 'farewell speech' to his beloved disciple, Timothy, he says: "My life is being poured out as a libation." His life is his prayer: a libation of love.

A Text from Tradition

St Gregory of Palamas (c. 1296-1357): "Thanksgiving for the benefits received from God is made acceptable by humility and not looking down on those who lack them. It is rendered unacceptable, however, by being conceited, as if those benefits resulted from our own efforts and knowledge, and by condemning those who have not received them. The Pharisee's behaviour and words prove he was afflicted with both these diseases. He went up to the Temple to give thanks, not to make supplication and, like a wretched fool, mingled conceit and condemnation of others with his thanksgiving."

Two Points for Reflection:

1. Commenting on this parable of the Pharisee and the Publican, a Guru remarked, "This world contains two types of people: Pharisees and Publicans." Confused, the disciple asked, "How does one recognize the Pharisees?" The Guru explained: "Simple! They're always the ones who always do the classifying!" Which type am I? Am I one to classify and condemn, divide and judge?
2. '*How*' and '*Why*' do I pray? My prayer ought neither to become a public platform for self-glorification nor condemnation of others, but ought to always remain a means for entering into relationship with God so as to worship, seek mercy, and decipher God's will. Mercy and grace are, after all, free gifts of God. In his pride and pomposity, the Pharisee would probably tell God, "O God, I'm so pure and perfect that I don't require your mercy. I can manage on my own. *You* better thank *me* for being so good!"

In Lighter Vein: A bishop once knelt before the altar and in a display of humility repeated loudly, "I'm a sinner, Lord, have mercy on me!" Inspired by his example, the parish priest too knelt beside the bishop and cried out, "I'm a sinner, have mercy on me, Lord!" Unable to restrain himself, the simple sacristan too fell on his knees and cried, "I'm a sinner have mercy on me!" Seeing this, the bishop nudged the priest and pointing to the sacristan said, "Look who thinks he's a sinner!" Holier-than-thou attitudes are often hallmarks of seemingly holy people. [End]