

30th Sunday of the Year (Year C)
(Ecclesiasticus 35:12-14. 16-19 / Luke 18:9-14)
27.10.2013

St Luke's gospel is often referred to as the gospel of prayer. This is because in his gospel account Luke pays particular attention to Jesus at prayer Himself and also to Jesus exhorting His disciples to pray and teaching them how to do so.

These past Sundays we have listened to a series of gospel passages containing teaching on prayer. They have stressed the importance of the prayer of thanksgiving, the necessity of perseverance in prayer and the fundamental role prayer plays in the Church's missionary engagement.

All of this teaching has been for us an invitation for us to go deeper in prayer. It has been an invitation for us to move beyond reciting prayers to enter into a deep personal, heart to heart encounter with the Lord.

Once again this morning the gospel passage we listen to brings us back to the theme of prayer.

What is drawn to our attention today is that our prayer must be humble and true if it is to win favour in the Lord's sight.

We could say that what we are called to by Jesus is authenticity in our prayer. For all of us what this amounts to is the humble acceptance of our existential poverty and admission of the fact that we are sinners.

In our first reading from the Book of Ecclesiasticus we read: *The humble man's prayer pierces the clouds.*

The point made here is that there is strength in humility.

Humility will bring us to where pride will never reach.

Humble prayer will touch God's heart.

Humility is a central theme in the Rule of St Benedict, of course.

The longest chapter in the Rule of Benedict is the chapter on humility.

In this chapter of the Rule we find that the biblical role model presented to the monk by Benedict - the biblical personage whose attitude of heart the monk (hear there every Christian) is invited to imitate - is none other than the publican whom we meet in today's gospel story.

I find this extraordinarily encouraging.

Who among us cannot identify with this man who didn't dare to raise his eyes to heaven because he was only too aware of his inadequacy and sin?

And who among us cannot say as this man seems to say: *Lord, I just don't how to pray, but here I am. All I can do is look to you for mercy.*

What we see manifested in the publican's attitude of heart as he stands before the Lord in prayer ties in with the teaching of the apostle Paul when he declares: *we do not know how to pray (of ourselves), the Spirit comes to help us in our weakness and prays within us 'Abba Father'*, thus formulating a prayer of confident trust in God - confident trust born out of an honest sense of our deep poverty and real misery.

Let's look at today's gospel scene a little more closely to see what else it might have to say to us where we are in our prayer lives and what might need adjusted in the way we pray.

When we examine what both men say in their prayer in this gospel scene we see that in the Pharisee's formulation there are many of the important elements that should be included in prayer.

Some might actually contend that because of this the Pharisee prays well.

But, of course, we are told in no uncertain terms that his prayer did not find favour in God's sight and so he clearly doesn't pray as he ought.

Where and how does the Pharisee's prayer fall down?

It falls down because his whole attitude of heart is wrong.

This man just hasn't grasped what prayer is all about!

He is far removed from the psalmist's attitude of heart when he prays: *Lord, my heart is not proud or haughty my eyes.*

The Pharisee who prides in his righteousness looks haughtily at the Publican; in his heart he judges and condemns the Publican whom he considers to be miserable without having any compassion for him and without having any inclination to show him mercy.

In contrast, the Publican who is a battered and bruised man and who clearly feels so inadequate and terribly unworthy before the Lord *gets it in one* in Christ's eyes.

His prayer is commended. We are told that his prayer was pleasing to God and *he went home at rights with the Lord.*

Why?

Because of his honesty and truthfulness; because of his humility of heart!

The Publican's expression of prayer was poor in many respects - a lot of the ingredients for good prayer that the Pharisee had in his formulation were missing in the Publican's simple plea for mercy - but it was the Publican who won God's favour because his prayer was humble and he recognised himself for what he was in all honesty and without any self-justification: *I am a sinner.*

This story illustrates for us that at the end of the day it is not the content of prayer that matters, but the attitude of heart of the person who prays.

Moreover - and I find this thought particularly consoling - it is not how the person who prays assesses him or her self that counts; it is not what the one who prays feels that matters.

It is what the Lord perceives: *He who regards and scrutinises the heart.*

Often our prayer will appear to us as not up to much: poor, really not very good ... and yet it may be accepted as pleasing to the Lord.

It may even be because our prayer feels so inadequate to us that it is truly pleasing to God ... because it is precisely our sentiment of inadequacy that keeps us well grounded, truly humble.

The focus of our prayer should be the Lord and not just our self!

I think it is important to stress this, for we could think that we have grasped the insight into prayer given to us by today's gospel parable by concluding all too rapidly that what matters is how one sees oneself.

We might conclude that we are praying well because, unlike the Pharisee, we don't see ourselves doing very well, and more like the Publican, we are inclined to see our own misery. But that isn't the whole point.

It isn't just enough to see one's misery!

That can amount to nothing more than displaying the same fundamental attitude as the Pharisee: being self-obsessed, self-possessed: having just our self as our focus.

While not ignoring one's misery, while humbly recognising one's poverty and inadequacy, in prayer one must look and see beyond oneself to recognise God's mercy.

In prayer it is God who should matter.

Time given to prayer should not just be time given to spiritual navel-gazing.

In true prayer God is the focus, not just oneself.

In authentic prayer it is God who counts.

The authenticity of our prayer will be measured by the fact that we come to see ourselves looked upon by the Lord when we pray: looked upon by God our Father with loving kindness, regarded with tender compassion and welcomed in gracious mercy.

Mary's prayer, the *Magnificat* - a prayer recorded for us early on in Luke's gospel, along with the other gospel canticles with which we are so familiar - sings of the Lord having *looked upon her lowliness - her humility of heart*.

Likewise Zechariah's prayer, the *Benedictus*, speaks of *the loving kindness of the heart of our God, His tender mercy, visiting us each and every day like the dawn from on high*, being manifested to those whom the Lord sees to stand in need of His liberating grace.

In the same vein Simeon's prayer speaks of the Lord *having taken into consideration and responded to the hope of His people Israel*: their hope for mercy.

In quoting Simeon's *Nunc Dimittis* I recall Benedict's counsel to us in his Rule for Monks, in what we could consider the bottom line of all his teaching in another very important chapter of the Rule, chapter 4, when he states that *we should never ever lose hope in God's mercy*.

It is always the prayer of those the Bible calls the *anawim*, the poor and lowly among God's people, that wins grace and favour in the Lord's sight.

The call addressed to us through today's gospel passage is a call to acknowledge our sin, while recognising and accepting ourselves to be loved by God in our frailty.

To see ourselves as sinners pardoned leads us to consider ourselves as we should: namely, totally dependent upon God, stripped of any sense of being in some way set apart, different and superior to others, wrapped up in our super-ego.

It is only when we are situated in humility, freed from our super-ego, that our genuine, real self may begin to emerge.

The gospel parable Jesus recounts for us this morning shows us that humility brings us closer to God as it subjects us more and more to the pull of the gravitational force of God's love.

So much for our relationship with God ...

Following on from that, we might ask what today's gospel passage has to say to us about our relationship to others.

Let me leave you with an answer to that question using not my own words, but an insight found in Sr Joan Chittister's commentary on the Rule of Benedict.

I quote: *Accepting our essential smallness and embracing it frees us from the need to lie, even to ourselves, about our frailties. More than that, it liberates us to respect, revere and deal gently with others.*

If only we were situated as Sr Joan Chittister tells us we should be. If only we were liberated from that tendency we can so readily share with the Pharisee *to pride ourselves on being virtuous and ready to despise everyone else*. Then we would be *at rights with God*, pleasing to Him!

Amen!