

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)
(Sirach 35:12-14. 16-18 / Luke 18:9-14)
27.10.2019

Dear brothers and sisters,

The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (known also as the parable of the Pharisee and the publican) is proposed to our meditation this morning to help us to reflect upon our prayer life.

Prayer, by which I mean true Christian prayer, is a dialogue in which we first listen to God and then speak to Him. When we pray, we listen to God who loved us before we ever loved Him. God's love for us does not depend on anything we may or may not have done. In our relationship with God, it is God who has the initiative. Our love for God is our answer to God's love for us. Prayer is also the moment when we praise God, we give thanks to Him and make our legitimate needs known to Him. God knows our needs already but he respects our freedom; he does not want to impose his blessings upon us. He wants us to ask for them, to wait for them and to receive them as a gift.

In the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, it is interesting to note that the Pharisee says a prayer **to himself**. Usually, we say a prayer 'to God', not 'to ourselves'. Pharisees were good religious people. Very often they were doing good pious things. But one of the mistakes of the Pharisees was to be self-righteous. They thought that they were able to save themselves by their good deeds, by their own strength. They believed that God loved them because they were doing good things. When the Pharisee of the parable says in his prayer: "I fast twice a week; I pay tithes on all I get", there is nothing wrong with that, far from it. But a problem arises because the Pharisee is self-righteous. In his prayer to himself, he adds: "I am not grasping, unjust, adulterous like the rest of mankind, and particularly I am not like this tax collector here". In other words he says: Lord, I am behaving rightly, not like the others; so, you cannot but love me. This Pharisee thinks that he can buy God's love with his good actions. In his prayer, the Pharisee was self righteous and, as a result, he despised others, especially the tax collector who was praying beside him.

When we pray to God, does it not happen that we are sometimes quite self-righteous? We are self-righteous when we compare ourselves to others, when we judge others. We are self-righteous when we think that we are good and alright, while others are bad and wrong. When we take this road, we forget that God loves each and every human being whom he created out of love. Obviously God does not love our sins, but He loves the persons we are. When we despise others in prayer, we despise the image of God which is present in them; we forget that they were created in God's image and likeness. In prayer, we have to pray for all people without exception, even our enemies. To despise others, to judge them, has no place in Christian prayer. From this perspective, the self-righteousness of the Pharisee of our parable is a good example of how we should not pray. The gospel tells us that "the Pharisee did not go home at rights with God".

On the contrary, the tax collector "stood some distance away, not daring even to raise his eyes to heaven; but he beat his breast and said: 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner'. This man went home again at rights with God". This tax collector is humble and addresses a humble prayer to God. A

tax collector was not a very popular person in Palestine at the time of Jesus. He was working with the Roman authorities who were occupying the Holy Land. He was considered to be a traitor by his fellow citizens whom he overcharged in order to make profit for himself at their expense. The tax collector knows and acknowledges his sins. His prayer is humble. True Christian prayer is always a humble prayer. It is a prayer addressed to God by a humble person.

In spirituality, we speak a lot of humility. But what is humility? What is a humble person? Recently, I was participating in a festal Evensong in a Church of Ireland Cathedral. The choir sang the Magnificat. As we are used to singing here: "The Lord scatters the proud-hearted" I was surprised to hear them singing: "The Lord has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts". –In the imagination of their hearts- It strikes me that a proud person is someone who flees or escapes into the imaginary, someone who does not keep his feet on the ground, someone who imagines himself or herself to be better and greater than they are; someone who dreams and is not in touch with the reality. A proud person is someone who lives in his mind and not in his heart. On the contrary, a humble person is someone who does not escape into the imaginary; he or she is someone who consents to their humanity, their weaknesses, their sinfulness.

A humble prayer from a humble person is all powerful in God's sight. It impacts upon God's heart. We heard in the first reading: "The humble man's prayer pierces the clouds; until it arrives he is inconsolable; nor will he desist until the Most High takes notice of him... And the Lord will not be slow, nor he will be dilatory on his behalf". Sometimes we complain about God and about our prayer which God does not seem to hear and answer. It would be helpful for us to ask ourselves: Does our prayer come from a humble heart? In other words: in our ordinary life, do we allow God to be God? Do we consent to being simply a creature and not our creator? Does it not happen that we sometimes take the place of God? Does it not happen that we dictate to God telling Him what He should do? If this is the case, perhaps we should not be surprised if our prayer seems to go unanswered.

Let us ask the Lord for the grace of a humble heart, a heart similar to the heart of the tax collector, a heart similar to Christ's own heart. Let us pray: Jesus meek and humble of heart, make our hearts like yours. Amen.