

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)
(Ecclesiasticus 35:12-14.16-19 / Luke 18:9-14)
23.10.2022
God, Others & Self

According to Jesus, there is no greater commandment than to love God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, with all our strength and our neighbour as ourselves. (cf. Lk 10:25-28) So three have to be loved: God, our neighbour and ourselves.

Today, in our Gospel reading, the Pharisee succeeded in getting it wrong on all counts. In his prayer, he reveals that he is wrong about himself, about others and about God.

Wrong about himself: the problem is not so much that he mentioned the good things he had done. Why not? This acknowledgement could have been part of a healthy sense of self-respect. The problem lay in the fact that he was visibly self-satisfied. His whole prayer was self-congratulatory, it revealed a cruel lack of self-awareness. His blindness isolated him from others and from God.

Clearly, the Pharisee was not secure in his own identity. His inner personal vulnerability manifested itself in his need to put others down. He did this in order to feel good about himself. He was a man who was not in touch with his real self and so who could not connect with others in a balanced way.

Not only was his attitude harmful in his own regard but it also hurt the tax-collector. And so he was wrong also about others. His judgemental thoughts were an insult to the tax-collector's integrity. Let us be clear: in his heart, the Pharisee killed the tax collector. His blindness to his own poverty made him blind to others' spiritual riches, their goodness and dignity.

Wrong about himself, wrong about others, the Pharisee was also wrong about God. His first mistake was that he spoke as if he was the source of all that was good in his life.

He gave the impression that his achievements afforded him a special status in God's eyes. At the end of the day, it seemed to the Pharisee as if God was indebted to him for his good behaviour.

More deeply, the Pharisee spoke to God as if on an equal footing and this reveals that his image of God and the relationship he thought he had with the Lord were completely distorted.

While the Pharisee was wrong on all these counts, we are told that the tax-collector "went home again at rights with God." Why is it that the Pharisee was wrong and that the tax-collector was right and just?

Maybe here more than anywhere else in the Gospels we see something the Benedictine Joan Chittister reminds us of when she states: "Humility is the basis for right relationships in life."

The Pharisee is not in touch with his real self. It is this that makes him so unsecure that he cannot be in touch with others and with God. By contrast, the tax-collector displays two aspects of what humility is about: honesty and communion.

The tax-collector is honest about who he is and he clearly positions himself as totally reliant upon God. He knows at least intuitively that to cling to one's false self and to promote individualism are not life-giving ways of being. Both to live with a mask, unaware of or

hiding who we truly are and to think that we can be self-reliant and self-sufficient beings prevent us from becoming human and humane.

As Christians we have been entrusted the message of reconciliation (cf. 2Co 5:19). Our mission is to be reconciled with God, with others and with ourselves. This process of reconciliation aims at making us and our world more life-giving and more life-enhancing; more conformed to God's image and likeness.

And yet the "Pharisee syndrome" – as we see it in our Gospel reading – is never too far from us.

It is never too far from our personal attitudes and decisions, never too far from the way our Churches function at times, never too far from some political statements made and programmes proposed.

What I called the "Pharisee syndrome" is similar to an entitlement mentality. In general, persons with a sense of entitlement have, like the Pharisee, a self-absorbed and self-referential view of the world with little regard or empathy for others; like the Pharisee, they are obsessed with their status and need to boost it to the detriment of those around them. Unfortunately the Pharisee syndrome does not make anybody strong, secure or whole.

In our midst, the tax-collector is the migrant who is rejected and sent off to Rwanda simply because he or she is a migrant; the tax-collector represents all those whom we do not listen to or whom we consider unable to exercise responsibilities in our communities simply because of their sexual orientation, their gender, their background or the colour of their skin.

In this context the call to be humble is clearly a call for us to be truthful and real. It is a call to build bridges. While in our countries and in our Churches some are tempted to erect walls on the basis of lies, to divide and polarise by fuelling fears, it is urgent for us to promote a culture of honest dialogue and true relationships.

Unlike the Pharisee, may we be at home in our own skin, respectful of others and rooted and grounded in God who is love. Then we will be strong and secure enough to embrace the complexities and diversities of life that are all gifts of God's bountiful creation.

Pope Francis recently reminded us: "We would do well to set aside our defensive barriers, and take a good bath of humility. All of us are brothers and sisters. Let us remember this: the Christian faith always asks us to walk alongside others, never to be solitary wayfarers. Faith always urges us to move beyond ourselves and towards God and our brothers and sisters, never to remain enclosed within ourselves." (*Homily*, 09.10.2022)