

GOD, HAVE MERCY ON ME, A SINNER

Nicky Ing - 24th October 2004

Zephaniah 3:1-9; Psalm 3; 2 Timothy 4:6-18; Luke 18:9-14

The parable in today's Gospel throws some light on our attitude in offering prayers to God. The Pharisee, a righteous man in the eyes of the community, and the tax-collector, a self-confessed wicked and sinful man, go to the Temple to offer their prayers to God. We can learn quite a lot about these two men from their prayers. The Pharisee seen here as an example of one who does 'Good works', has plenty to brag about...but yes, he is a good man. He is just, faithful to his vows, and conscientious about fulfilling his religious duties...he fasts, he tithes, and as we see from the story, he prays. The key word for the Pharisee is 'I'. He does thank God, yes, but his thoughts are focused on his own achievements..... He has done so many good deeds, that he is full of self-congratulation for having done them all well!!!! And he fully believes he deserves all the good things he receives. He is so busy comparing himself favourably with other people.....thieves, rogues, adulterers....and even the tax collector praying a few yards away.....that he cannot recognise his own sinfulness before God....chiefly his pride, vanity, and self-righteousness....so his main problem, though he seems unaware of it, is his attitude.

The tax-collector, on the other hand, is a man who knows his place and his station in life. In the time of Jesus the tax collector would take money from his fellow countrymen and he would give it to the Romans, who were the occupying power...the only reason he would do this was for personal profit...so that he could enjoy a comfortable lifestyle. The tax collectors were not popular amongst their own people. This man, as he stands to pray in the Temple, makes no attempt to hide anything. His prayer is simple and heartfelt and he expresses his need of God.....he offers a prayer of humility, an honest confession of his need for mercy. It is the attitude of his heart, says Jesus, which is pleasing to God, and allows him to return home 'justified'.

Jesus is not so much asking his listeners to interpret the parable, but rather to allow the story to help them to reflect on their own spirituality. (And of course that goes for us as well). It is not whether Pharisees are good, and tax collectors bad, that is being questioned...not the type of **person**, whose prayer is accepted or not accepted....but a certain attitude in **prayer**. Jesus is asking for a profound **honesty** before God in prayer...an honesty that knows the all-encompassing mercy of God. This kind of honesty acknowledges that God has considered humankind to be worth saving in the first place...and that **is** good news. It is such good news for us that when we say: '**God, have mercy on me, a sinner**' and we really mean it, because of Jesus Christ and what he has done for us, we **are** included in the family of God's children. This is so wonderful for us to know.....but it is often hard for us to believe it all the time... We, too, become like the Pharisee and start reminding God of all the good things we have done and are doing so that we feel justified.....we need to take care that we don't demand solutions to all our problems as a special 'benefit' and reward for what **we** may think is our nearly perfect behaviour!! If we do this, then we **are** in for a big disappointment. Who are we to come before God with a list of our own achievements and expect special treatment in the sight of God? The more honest we are about who

God is, and so about who we are in the presence of God, so much more does the prayer of the tax collector make sense for us...the more it may become our own prayer. (As it did for St. Paul, who in the reading from Timothy expresses his full confidence and trust in God... Yes, he has fought the good fight, he has finished the marathon, he has kept the faith...he has persevered in prayer... He is old, in prison, facing death...but all his attention is on God...who has reserved for him the crown of righteousness, which he will give him on that day...and he gives all the glory to God. The focus is not on himself, but on God).

It is quite easy for us, I think, to fall into a kind of spiritual self-righteousness. We **do** tend to judge others when they don't share our values, or live in the same way as we do. We live in such a competitive world, and are often tempted to strive for recognition, and importance...as if they are the most crucial virtues. Jesus reminds us in this parable that God is God and that we are not. The tax collector asked God for mercy...and was granted his request. The Pharisee asked for nothing from God...and so he received nothing. We need to realise that everything we have and are comes from God in the first place....our dependence on God is so much part of our human frailty...

How complacent am I in my relationship with God? Am I really aware of my deep need of grace, and forgiveness? Do I compare myself with other people, tending to look down on them? Do I, like the Pharisee, sometimes congratulate myself for not having the same weaknesses as others, and am I blind to my own failings? It is so easy to get into the habit of confessing the sins of others...but this prevents us from looking at our own in a spirit of honesty. It is said that for every finger we point at someone else, there are three more fingers pointing back at ourselves! Do I sometimes stand in judgment over others? What does Jesus want **me** to learn today, from this story?

Bernard of Clairvaux, who was a French Cistercian monk living in the 12th Century, wrote a book called '**The Steps of Humility**', and in his book he wrote three important things.

First, '**Pursue the truth of God, and you will come to contemplation.**'
Second, '**Pursue the truth of neighbour, and you will come to compassion.**'
Thirdly, '**Pursue the truth of self, and you will come to humility.**'

If we follow this guideline, in our own prayers, perhaps we will find that our prayers become more real. We each need to experience for ourselves a genuine desire for God. It is only then that we will learn to trust God more fullynot because of who **we** are, but because of who **God** is. So may we have the humility not to hide our weakness, and may we also be given the wisdom to learn from the mistakes that we make. Our prayers may not always change the circumstances around us as we might like them to...none of us are likely to get through life without a fair share of pain and struggle....but genuine prayer can begin to change our own attitudes to those circumstances. So, in facing not only the joys, but also the tough times that we meet in our lives, may we know, deep in our hearts, that God's love, God's enabling, and God's grace is sufficient for all our needs. **Amen.**

Prayer

O Lord, give enough tears to keep me human, and enough humour to keep me wise. Give me enough setbacks to keep me humble, and enough accomplishments to keep me confident. I need enough patience to teach me waiting, and hope to keep me trusting. Please give me enough friends to give me love, enough memories to give me comfort, and enough faith to keep me going. Amen