

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year C

The readings this week are something of a follow-up to the readings of last week. They revolve around the idea that God hears the prayer of the poor and lowly. Social standing, status and reputation mean absolutely nothing to God. It's the heart of each individual that counts.

The first reading comes from the book of Ecclesiasticus or Sirach. This book was written by a Jewish sage named Jesus ben Sira living in the second century before Christ. As a wise man and community leader ben Sira compiled a series of reflections on life, all based on his personal experience and wisdom. In today's extract he reminds his people that it is stupid trying to bribe God who does not take into account a person's status in society but listens to all those who wholeheartedly serve God.

Sirach's message provides reassurance for those who are at the bottom of the financial or social ladder. In a world where ordinary battlers had little or no status in society people were easily convinced that God would never stoop to hear their prayer. Sirach declares that God looks with favour on the disadvantaged like the disabled, the poor, the orphan and the widow. However, he does point out that God does not automatically favour these people. The divine smile is always directed toward the honest 'tryer' who may be wronged in any way. In a poetic way Sirach affirms that the prayer of the just person pierces the clouds. This, of course, comes from the idea that was current in the ancient world that God was a just and benevolent being who dwelt in a heaven that was in the sky above the clouds.

The Lord is near to the broken-hearted and lifts up the crushed

In the responsorial psalm the poet sings of the fact that God hears the cry of the poor and broken-hearted. The understanding here is that those who are crushed in spirit are good and honest people. God turns away from the wicked and favours the righteous. Today's extract comes from an acrostic song where each couplet begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet in sequence. The poet certainly gives thanks that his prayer had been answered but the whole psalm is more of a sung meditation coming from the spiritual depths of a sage who is using music to teach the goodness of God and the relationship we should have toward the Almighty. In the middle of this psalm there is a strophe urging the listener/reader to 'avoid evil and do good, seek peace and pursue it.' This strophe is not included in today's extract.

The second reading continues the advice given to Timothy on how to be a good pastor to his community. We encounter here a classic statement attributed to St Paul to the effect that he has fought the good fight and finished the race and is now prepared to meet his Lord. Paul uses a metaphor taken from the sports arena to describe his life of service in the ministry of spreading the good news about Jesus Christ. Having maintained his fidelity to this calling he now looks forward to the reward that the winner of a race received in the games. The difference is that he is not looking to the perishable prize of a laurel wreath but to the imperishable crown of eternal life with God, which is promised to those who keep faith with their Christian calling. There is a connection here with the first reading because Paul is referring to God as a fair judge who does not assess us by human standards or values but by our goodness. Awareness of this reward is clearly an incentive for good living.

The Lord stood by me

Like the psalmist, Paul is confident that the Lord will stand by him in every trial and difficulty. He gives Timothy information about others who deserted him when he was on trial and when the going got tough, and there is a note of disappointment in his tone here, but the Lord can be relied on to support and defend him no matter what, and this is what buoys him up. He concludes with a doxology or a short expression of praise and glory toward God. In fact, Paul often ends a reflection on the goodness of God with a note of praise and thanks.

We could also reflect on our own relationships and consider how solid we are toward those who may lean on us. Are we always a rock and a shield toward our friends and colleagues? God forbid that we should be like the reed shaken in the wind that Jesus referred to! One of the down-to-earth qualities of John the Immerser was that he was true to his commitment and never wavered in his fidelity to both his calling and his friends. Jesus was very firm and quite poetic in his praise of John's personal qualities.

The gospel reading contains the familiar parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Luke makes it clear that Jesus was targeting some of his listeners who were confident in their own righteousness and despised everyone else. As in many of his parables Jesus picks characters who are usually controversial or who wind up acting in unexpected ways. In this case he contrasts the Pharisee, the religious leader who knows and

teaches the Law of Moses, and the tax collector who generally rips people off as he collects taxes on behalf of the hated Romans.

Jesus paints a picture of the Pharisee, filled with certainty, congratulating himself in the words of an address to God. Immediately we realise how outrageous this 'prayer' is, focused as it is on the self-centred Pharisee, and in addition we react to the judgment he passes on the tax collector who is there praying a little way off. There is an obvious note of contempt in the words of the Pharisee. By contrast, the tax collector beats his breast in sorrow and simply asks God for mercy. Jesus notes that the tax collector does not even dare raise his eyes to heaven so overcome is he with shame. We cannot help but see that he is a realist while the Pharisee is having himself on, floating along in his own world of self-righteousness.

Both these men give Jesus' listeners pause for thought

One major error that has been made in Christian interpretations of this parable is to condemn all Pharisees as hypocrites. We even see the word 'pharisaic' in the dictionary to mean hypocritical or self-righteous. The point in this story is that the Pharisees were seen as religious leaders who were expected to show fidelity to the Law of Moses by example. In reality, the Pharisee in this parable is acting out of expected character. Similarly, the tax collector is taken to be such a villain that finding him praying in the Temple is something of a shock. He, too, is acting out of character and both these men give Jesus' listeners pause for thought as they wonder what he is getting at.

Jesus is not having a shot at the Pharisees in particular but is really targeting anyone who indulges in self-righteousness and passes judgment on others. By the same token he is not suggesting that tax collectors are secretly good guys. Rather, he is giving credit to any people who recognise their weaknesses and faults and their need for divine help and compassion. Nowhere does Jesus suggest that the Pharisee is not all the things he mentions – he is not an adulterer or a thief or whatever else. But his mistake is in taking smug pride in his self-righteousness and using this as a foundation for criticising others and showing contempt for them. He has passed rash judgment on the tax collector, unfairly judging the book by its cover.

The parable criticises condescension in our relationships and attacks the negative attitude of 'I am the good person' but 'those others are the bad guys.' This kind of judgmental attitude is not only destructive of our relationship with God but undermines our human relationships. Its effect is that we can only tolerate those who are like us and we have little time for those who disagree with us or who are different from us. This attitude, of course, would amount to crass immaturity.

The reading finishes on the note of humility, but genuine humility is tied up with realism. If we have a realistic view of ourselves we will have no room for self-righteousness, and can accept criticism without getting hostile. We can also accept difference with maturity, allowing others to be individuals in their own space. We will have a down-to-earth awareness of our faults and will, above all, never pass judgment on others.



We must never undervalue any person.

St Francis de Sales

When you judge other people you have no time to love them.

Mother Teresa

Great Spirit, grant that I may not judge my neighbour until I have walked a mile in his moccasins.

Native American prayer



A Zen master goes into a hamburger shop and asks, 'I'd like a hamburger with the works.'

So the cook makes him a superb hamburger with everything on it and hands it to the Zen master, who pays with a 20 dollar note. The hamburger man puts the note in his cash register and closes the drawer.

'Where's my change?' asks the Zen master.

The hamburger vendor serenely replies, 'Change must come from within.'

A woman is meditating quietly in an attempt to gain inner peace. After two minutes she says,

'Come on inner peace, I haven't got all day!'

Laurie Woods