

SPIRITUALITY

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

2 Cor 5:19

R/. Alleluia, alleluia.

God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ,
and entrusting to us the message of salvation.

R/. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel

Luke 18:9-14; L150C

Jesus addressed this parable to those who were convinced of their own righteousness and despised everyone else. "Two people went up to the temple area to pray; one was a Pharisee and the other was a tax collector.

The Pharisee took up his position and spoke this prayer to himself,

'O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity—greedy, dishonest, adulterous—or even like this tax collector.

I fast twice a week, and I pay tithes on my whole income.'

But the tax collector stood off at a distance and would not even raise his eyes to heaven

but beat his breast and prayed,

'O God, be merciful to me a sinner.'

I tell you, the latter went home justified, not the former;

for whoever exalts himself will be humbled,

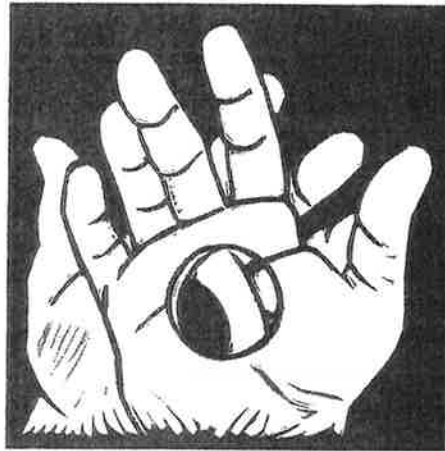
and the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

Reflecting on the Gospel

On this Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time, the last Sunday of October, we come to the conclusion of the Lukan material on the journey to Jerusalem, also known as the "major insertion" from Luke 9:51 through 18:14. We began reading from this section in June, on the Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time! So we've been with Luke's special material for some time and we remain on the journey to Jerusalem with Jesus even after this week.

The parable today strikes one's conscience with the desire most if not all

Christians have to "be right with God." This desire animated the Jewish people of Jesus' time too, and it continues to be a goal of many religious people regardless of faith or denomination. But Jesus' parable penetrates deeply into the attitudes that often lie below the surface. And for the Pharisee in the parable, his attitudes were on full display. He prays in thanksgiving that he is not like "the rest of humanity" (quite a broad stroke!) or "even like this tax collector." The Pharisee has justified himself before God by following the rules, obeying Mosaic Law, doing "what God wants" as he understands it. On the other hand, the tax collector approaches God with sincere humility, admitting his sinfulness. For that, he, rather than the Pharisee, is justified, or "right with God."



We are not the authors of our own salvation. Nothing we do or accomplish will achieve a right relationship with God other than admitting we are sinners and asking for God's mercy. A fundamental temptation for religious people the world over is to fall into the false notion that by our actions we make ourselves pleasing to God. The good deeds we do, attending Mass, keeping holy days, praying the rosary or other special prayers, being active at the parish are all well and good. But none by itself or in combination with the others will put us in a right relationship with God. Only by acknowledging our own shortfalls without excuse and by simply relying on the mercy of God will we be placed upright before God. There is a reversal at work as the concluding line of the gospel indicates: "whoever exalts himself will be humbled, / and the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

Living the Paschal Mystery

The Christian life and the entire paschal mystery is a reversal of the norms, standards, and structures of the world. We do not need to look far in our world to see those who seek to exalt themselves. We too are likely part of that group from time to time if we are honest with ourselves. Each of us has a bit of the Pharisee's attitude. Today's parable tells us that we are to identify with the tax collector, the one who comes humbly before God confessing himself to be a sinner. Only by humbling oneself will exaltation come. And those who seek exaltation will be humbled. This echoes a theme announced by Mary's canticle in the opening chapter of the gospel. "He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones / but lifted up the lowly" (Luke 1:52).

Jesus, too, will be humbled to the point of death on the cross, and subsequently exalted to heaven. This fundamental reversal is an essential Christian message, and it can be difficult to absorb. In our modern world (and in the

ancient) the proud are exalted, the humble are brought low. But we proclaim the Good News. The lowly will be exalted and the proud will be brought low. It is the paschal mystery.

Focusing the Gospel

Key words and phrases: O God, be merciful to me a sinner.

To the point: The words of the Pharisee and the tax collector provide an interesting contrast in prayer. The Pharisee is intent upon listing off his many attributes and even though he does this under the guise of giving God thanks for his many virtues, we get the sense that his prayer is about *him*, not about God. The tax collector's prayer is simple. He calls God "merciful" and identifies himself as a "sinner." Despite his lowly standing in the religious community, this tax collector, whose job requires him to collude with the Roman oppressors, has a relationship with the living God, the Merciful One. This is what sends him home justified, while the Pharisee, too full of himself to have room for God's mercy, leaves empty.

Connecting the Gospel

to the second reading: St. Paul's words to Timothy in some ways could be likened to the prayer of the Pharisee in the gospel parable. St. Paul writes, "I have competed well; I have finished the race; / I have kept the faith." But whereas the Pharisee is self-satisfied and content with his own righteousness, Paul is focused on the larger picture that all might come to salvation in Jesus. He gives credit to Jesus for the strength afforded him in his ministry to the Gentiles. Paul even prays that the failure of some to stand by him when he was arrested "not be held against them."

to experience: It is not the Pharisee's recognition of his own good works like fasting and tithing, and abstention from bad ones like greed, dishonesty, and adultery, that leads him to be the villain in this parable. Instead, it is the way his pride separates him from his fellow human being and from God that makes him the villain. Prayer should be an act of unity, not of exclusion.

Connecting the Responsorial Psalm

to the readings: The psalmist sings, "The LORD is close to the brokenhearted; / and those who are crushed in spirit he saves." We see this illustrated in Jesus' parable. The tax collector, who knows his sin, beats his breast, and stands "off at a distance," is restored to right relationship with God. Despite this we should not whitewash the tax collector's sins. As Jewish New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine writes, this tax collector "is probably rich, an agent of Rome, and, as a tax collector, has likely shown no mercy to others" (*Short Stories by Jesus*). We can assume he is in very real need of the mercy he asks for in the temple. And it is granted to him, for, as the psalmist knows, "The LORD redeems the lives of his servants; / and no one incurs guilt who takes refuge in him."

to psalmist preparation: We believe in a God of perfect justice and perfect mercy. Where in your life are you in need of God's justice? Where do you experience God's mercy?

PROMPTS FOR FAITH-SHARING

The author of Sirach tells us, "Give to the Most High as he has given to you" (35:12; NABRE). What are the most precious gifts you have received from the Lord? How are you using these gifts to build God's kingdom?

The psalmist sings, "The LORD is close to the brokenhearted; / and those who are crushed in spirit he saves." How have you experienced God's presence in times of extreme grief and sorrow?

Nearing the end of his letter to Timothy, St. Paul writes, "I have competed well; I have finished the race; / I have kept the faith." Does this metaphor of the spiritual life as a race speak to you? Why or why not?

If Jesus were to tell the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in your community, which characters would he use to illustrate his point about the humble and the proud? Who is given spiritual status in your community and who is looked down on?