

The 30th Sunday of Year C: Status does not guarantee closeness to God.
1st Reading: Ecclesiasticus 35:12-19: God responds to honesty, not status;
2nd Reading: 2 Tim 4:6-8+16-18: Paul kept the faith & trusted in God;
Gospel: Luke 18:9-14: The Pharisee & tax-collector praying in the Temple.

This Sunday's readings follow the recent pattern: a gospel (from St Luke, just now), with a first reading from the Old Testament, chosen to match it; then, in the middle, a reading from St Paul, with a theme of its own. The gospel and first reading have this shared topic: that God does not worry about human titles, official status or even 'respectability' in his dealings with us. For the first reading, you'll need either a post-1970 missal or an RC Bible, as it's one of those Old Testament books that the Reformers excluded from their Bibles. Often called "Sirach" (from its author), the book deals with how the wise person should live. He begins bluntly, "The Lord is a judge who is no respecter of personages." In a way similar to St Luke 200 years later, the writer argues that God loves all, especially the "orphan", the "widow" - and the "humble man", whose "prayer pierces the clouds". In a way that would upset senior priests, lawyers & experts in Jesus' time, the writer argues that the 'little people' of this world are close to God. It is a lesson that we need to remember, even now.

If the first reading would have unsettled the Pharisees with whom Jesus argued, then his parable in the gospel must have infuriated them. The Pharisee Party's membership was largely scribes, lawyers, teachers of the Jewish Law, etc. They were a 'lay' (not clerical) group, and while not all rabbis agreed with them, and despite their small number, they were still very powerful. They prided themselves on 'respectability' by strict adherence to the Law of Moses and felt themselves close to God. (For a contemporary example, think of those 'morality' police who are the cause of so much unrest in Iran.). Therefore, their outlook on religion was very nit-picking, and they effectively limited God's loving influence over ordinary people.

That is the background to Jesus' gospel parable. The two men who went to pray in the Temple represented the opposite extremes of 'respectability': the Pharisee, so close to God in his observance of the Law, and a tax-collector, seen as the enemy of the people, a cheat, a collaborator with the occupying Romans – in short, a bad egg. I hope you read the story for yourself, but the gist is that the Pharisee was grateful for NOT being like the other man (which was snobby, if correct), but then he reminded God of just how much he did for God: fasting and paying his religious dues. However, the tax-collector simply stood at the back,

beat his breast and said, “O God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” He went home “at rights with God”; the Pharisee did not.

The first thing to note is that religion is a great leveller. I remember long queues for Confession at the Newcastle churches of St Dominic’s and the Cathedral – people of all classes, occupations and ages: saints and sinners alike. Everyone was equal in the sight of God - all seeking mercy & forgiveness. The problem was that the Pharisee wasn’t – he seemed to need neither forgiveness nor mercy. His “prayer” was telling God what God knew already: that the man was not like others, especially the sinner standing at the back. His prayer had become a distraction – contrasting the tax-collector’s faults with his own worthiness. It never occurred to him to ask for the grace to pray properly.

At the back of the Temple, the tax-collector beat his breast, simply asking for mercy. Perhaps he was a loyal husband, good father and dependable friend? He doesn’t mention this – God knows it anyway. Trying to see his faults as God sees them – truthfully - he simply begs forgiveness. That is the faith that saves us. Within months, Jesus, the Son of God, would die on a cross to prove this. When I have been saying Mass in prison, I have come across some who are indifferent to any damage they have done, but others have same mind-set as the tax-collector - simply seeking forgiveness, wanting to put the past behind them.

In the 2nd reading, Paul’s final message to Timothy is his epitaph: “The time has come for me to be gone”. Summing up his life, he writes these unforgettable words: “I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith.” When we remember his decades of struggle, now nearing their end in Rome, his language brings a shiver to the spine. He has tried his best to bring the gospel to “pagans” – non-Jews – and God has kept him safe (so far) to do it. Once it’s all over, God will bring him safely to Heaven.

I suggest that both the gospel and 2nd reading this week get us to the basis of religion. People can (and do) argue over issues that seem important to them (church rules, liturgy, dress codes, etc) but Paul’s approaching execution and Jesus’ parable about true sorrow & humility bring us up short. The Pharisee had done all the “right” things; the tax-collector had done none; however, the latter’s sincere sorrow mattered more to God than the former’s self-satisfaction. Paul, ex-Pharisee that he was, knew he had been an “earthenware pot” (2 Cor. 4:7) containing the treasure of God’s grace. If you and I can be as honest as Paul and the tax-collector, we won’t go far wrong. *Fr Jim Dunne.*