

Thirtieth Sunday Per Annum (C)

October 23, 2016. *The prayer of the humble pierces the clouds, and it will not rest until it reaches its goal (Sir. 35:17)*

Today is *World Mission Sunday*, and throughout the world Catholics are invited to support the missionary efforts of the Church through prayer and sacrifice. May God reward your generosity and support of the missions through your offerings. The parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee which is well known to us may help us to understand the scope of God's Kingdom and the transformative and liberating power of the Gospel of Salvation that the Church has been commanded to preach *to the close of the age (Mt. 28:20)*.

Like all of our Lord's parables, this parable is meant *to lead gradually to the hidden reality that can be truly discovered only through discipleship* (Pope Benedict XVI). In other words, we can only fully understand what Our Lord is teaching us if we endeavour to be His disciples. Our Lord says: *To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, so that seeing they may see, and hearing they may not understand (Lk. 8:10)*. The choice of characters in this parable is very interesting because Our Lord contrasts two opposite extremes; at least as it concerns respectability and social acceptance. Tax collectors were generally suspected of dishonesty and despised as sinners, especially by the Pharisees. Collectors were sometimes guilty of extortion, exacting personal commissions beyond the required tax amount; and since they collected taxes for the unwelcome Romans, foreign rulers, collectors were also branded as traitors to Israel's hope for national independence. The Pharisees also despised tax collectors because their contacts with Gentiles rendered them defiled by ritual standards. Although not Israel's official teachers or leaders, the Pharisees – the Jewish historian Josephus Flavius tells us that there were roughly six thousand of them – were popular and held great sway with the masses. The Pharisees whose name literally means *separated ones (perushim)* were religious separatists: while our Lord's proclamation of the Kingdom of God was open to all the nations, reaching out to embrace all with mercy, even a sinful tax collector; *for the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost (Lk. 19:10)*.

Those who heard this parable as Our Lord told it did not have to stretch their imagination to understand what Our Lord was saying and it seems that at least in the case of the Evangelist and former tax collector, St. Matthew who left everything and followed Jesus (*Lk. 5:27*), and of Zacchaeus, also a tax collector who repented, and Nicodemus, the Pharisee who came to Our Lord secretly to discuss His teaching; the parable moved them to follow Our Lord and accept His message of salvation and the treasure that is the Kingdom of Heaven (*Mt. 13:44*). The characters of this parable, though fictitious, nevertheless obviously represented certain currents of thought and prevalent attitudes to which Our Lord addressed His Gospel of Salvation. The same is true in any age and in any culture or society where the Gospel is preached.

As the Word of God is brought to bear on our lives in our specific time, I suggest that the prayer of the tax collector and the prayer of the Pharisee are expressive of two very different approaches to the Gospel in a culture that at face value, seems to have rejected the need for salvation or deliverance for this is what salvation implies: being delivered and transferred to a situation or state of safety from one of certain mortal danger. Beating his breast, the tax collector prays, *'God, be*

merciful to me, a sinner' (Lk. 18:13). His prayer, and it is no less our prayer, gives voice to the insufficiency of the human condition. Self-sufficiency is an illusion that can tempt all of us whether we be tempted by our youth or wealth or ability or intellect. We are not self-sufficient either individually or even collectively. Our happiness ultimately depends on the quality of our relationships with ourselves, with others and most importantly, with God. Perhaps tax collectors sought their security in the abundance of wealth; even at the cost of being ostracized as virtual enemies among their own people. As Our Lord tells the parable, the tax collector was *standing far off [and] would not even look up to heaven*. He is an outcast and at least in relation to his community, dead. The prayer of the tax collector is a cry for deliverance, for mercy and salvation. His confession of sin – *'God be merciful to me a sinner'* – is an essential requisite for salvation in the spiritual order. The authentic Gospel of salvation that the Church has been charged to preach addresses each individual and in the response that one makes to this Gospel there is a commitment to save one's soul; *for what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his life* (Mk. 8:36)? The tax collector for all intents had no life to speak of. He was completely alienated from others and yes, even himself; and in the experience of poverty he cries out for mercy. *The prayer of the humble pierces the clouds, and it will not rest until it reaches its goal*. And so Our Lord assures us: *'I tell you, this man went down to his house justified'* (Lk. 18:14). A right relationship with God is the foundation of a truly happy life.

What about the prayer of the Pharisee? *'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.'* (Lk. 18:11-12). His prayer is an exercise in self-affirmation; essentially a list of all the reasons why he is better than others. He is at the centre of his prayer, not God. His prayer is about himself; and that fundamental error, effectively a religion that centers on man and not God, is at the very heart of what is sometimes called the Social Gospel: the reduction of Christianity to earthbound good works that have mankind as their centre. In the war that the world wages against the Church, especially in our times, the Social Gospel is used as a bludgeon to beat the Gospel of Salvation. The Christian concept of salvation is dismissed as irrelevant since we are fine just as we are and the Church is tolerated only if she provides social services and only if according to the dictates of the secular culture. The fact that at least in our part of the world, the state has usurped the corporal works of mercy has numbed many believers into thinking that the state or particular political parties cannot be that bad though many positions held and promoted are completely antithetical to Catholic teaching. St. Paul the Apostle, one of the greatest missionaries of all time reminds us that *the kingdom of God is not food or drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit* (Rom. 14:17). We must never lose sight of the fact that when primacy of place is not given to God, in time man is enslaved. Without God there is no real compassion or freedom or equality.

Neither our prayer nor our life can be self-referential. We are created to find our fulfilment outside ourselves; in the gift of self to others through sacrificial love and ultimately only in God. In his sinful life the tax collector was tempted to material self-sufficiency which proved to be an illusion. The Pharisee sought salvation in himself and his good deeds but this too is false for we receive the gift of salvation from a loving God whose loving Fatherhood we acknowledge and rejoice in, *at the Saviour's command and formed by divine teaching*.