

30<sup>th</sup> Sunday (C)

27<sup>th</sup> October 2019

'God, be merciful to me, a sinner'

*Ecc 35: the humble man's prayer pierces the clouds.*

*Ps 32: the Lord is*

*close to the broken hearted.*

*2Tim 4: The Lord stood by me and gave me*

*power. Lk 18:9-14: the Pharisee and the publican.*

St Luke's is always considered the 'Gospel of Mercy,' and the 'Gospel of the little ones,' because of the many incidents and the many parables in which Our Lord highlights His outreach to the poor, the marginalized, the poor in spirit. It gives St Luke's Gospel a particular flavour, an appeal, as he emphasizes the fact that Our Lord has a special care for the weak and downtrodden, the humble and the meek.

This moving little parable that the Lord tells in Lk 18, combines these two elements: His concern for the outcast (in this case, the tax collector), and His focus on mercy, our need for forgiveness. The parable turns on the details regarding the *prayer* of each of these two men who went to the Temple to worship God. The prayer of the first man was said "to himself," it says, ... in other words, it's not a prayer to God at all, it's a selfish statement of self-congratulation, claiming his own goodness but at the same time denouncing his fellow worshipper, the tax collector. In

no way can this be considered a prayer at all, Jesus suggests. The tax collector, however — the one whom Jesus's original hearers would have been pre-disposed to dislike, or even despise — utters humbly, from way back in the shadows at the back of the Temple, a simple but heartfelt, genuine, prayer: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." Which of these prayers is a true prayer, says Jesus? Which of these two men goes home "at rights with God"? Not the one purporting outwardly to be holy! No, but the one who was a sinner coming humbly and honestly to confess his guilt, receive God's forgiveness and a fresh start.

It's a strong reminder, every time we hear this parable, that we must always be examining our lives as to our honesty, humility, and worthiness before God. We must never get so used to being here in church before the Lord, at Mass, that we make presumptions about our goodness. Before we make any judgments about others, we are in need of examining our own lives. Jesus says this multiple times in all sorts of ways. The first attribute of the true Christian is to see oneself in God's light, ... that means to humble

oneself before the majesty of God; not despairing or feeling downcast, but simply accepting the awesome holiness and grandeur of God, before whom we are small, but beloved, creatures. Humility is a truly beautiful virtue, and one we should pray to have the grace to exercise all our life. “God, be merciful to me, a sinner,” can be a simple part of our daily prayer. Let’s not forget that Jesus placed an appeal for God’s mercy into the very heart of His prayer for us, the ‘Our Father’: “forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” As we say this, each day, to God the Father, we should mean it, and accept that before we become judges over others’ sins, we need to attend to the avoiding, overcoming, and putting right, of our own sins.

The parable that Luke puts before us this Sunday, then, provides for us an image that is easy to call to mind. How am I relating to God; and how am I relating to my neighbour? I am a sinner, and so, most likely, is my neighbour ... and whilst we are both called to holiness and a better life through God’s grace, yet the very best way that I can help my neighbour/family member/friend to be a better

person is if I’m a better person myself. Let’s imagine, for example, that the Pharisee in the parable was more in tune with what God would want of him ... What might his prayer have been then? ... “Dear God, I see this tax collector here behind me. Bless him, Lord — I know that he’s in a despised profession. It’s good to see him here, Lord, and may this be a turning point for him. Give him the strength to change his life for the better, to avoid hurting others through extortion and fraud, ... perhaps to return lovingly to his family, to turn again to You, Lord, and find new strength. Help me, Lord, to keep him close to You in prayer. Help me set him a good example of prayer and faith. Bless Him, Lord, and give him peace today.”

Surely that would be a real prayer! Not self-conceited, but truly godly. Let’s ask for the Lord for that gift of humility that we all need in greater measure, so we can have a truer more honest relationship with our all-holy God, and a more-blessed, forgiving, and loving relationship with one another. *Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us ...*