

This Sunday's Readings – the 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time – This Sunday we continue the theme of prayer. Last week we learned that we must be persistent in prayer but prayer, no matter how persistent, is meaningless without the belief (faith) that God will hear our prayer and respond to it. Today we learn about “the attitude required of the person of faith”.

The first reading is taken from the Book of Sirach, which is also known by two other names – The Wisdom of Jesus Ben Sira (Sirach is the Greek form of this name) and Ecclesiasticus (Latin for Church Book). The Book of Sirach was written in Hebrew sometime after 200 BC and translated into Greek by the author's grandson around 132 BC and is part of the Deutero-canonical Books of the Bible or Second Canon. These books are only recognized by the Catholic Church. This book is also unique in that it is the only biblical book that identifies its author and is the only biblical book that has a forward (not considered inspired). Sirach was a wise sage and priest who lived in Jerusalem and who was steeped in the law and in the prophets. In this reading we see that all persons are equal before God. When it comes to prayer, God shows no partiality. However, it is the prayer of the oppressed, the weak, and the humble that will “pierce the clouds” and be answered swiftly by God. It is sincerity and humility that make prayer acceptable to God. Fr. Roger Karban in his 2004 article for *The Evangelist* adds this comment on today's first reading – “Knowing they can't fall back on the goodness of their actions, the weak and lowly in Sirach's passage can only fall back on God's commitment to help the weak and lowly (Sir 35: 12-14, 16-18). "Yahweh is a God of justice," Sirach writes, "who knows no favorites." In Scripture, "justice" almost always refers to the relationships we form with one another, including our relationship with God and His relationship with us. We cringe and even protest when we hear of politicians appointing friends and relatives to high-paying jobs. We presume such people don't have the ability or talents necessary to fill these positions. Some strings were pulled to get them their jobs. Yet, when it comes to God and us, nepotism is not only acceptable; it's presumed. God is predisposed to those with whom He relates. "Though not unduly partial toward the weak, yet God hears the cry of the oppressed. Those who serve God willingly are heard; their petition reaches the heavens." A mutual relationship guarantees God's favor”.

The Gospel reading from Luke is the well known parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, which as was last Sunday's parable was unique only to Luke. In order to understand this parable, it must be understood that Pharisees were very religious individuals who strictly followed the Law of Moses. Tax collectors on the other hand were despised by the people because they collaborated with the Romans. Both go to the temple to pray, the Pharisee in the front and the tax collector in the back. All the Pharisee does is to congratulate himself for following the Law and being better than everyone else, especially the tax collector. The tax collector, in true humility, recognizes his faults and dependence on God and asks for forgiveness. His prayer is heard by God. As Jesus said – “whoever exalts himself will be humbled and the one who humbles himself will be exalted”. Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* comments on the difference between the Pharisee and the tax collector – “What was wrong about the Pharisee was his approach to God: he prayed with himself;

he set before God all his merits, compared himself with the publican, and said with Little Jack Horner, “What a good boy am I!”— thereby smashing his goodness with one blow. He came before God trusting in his own, really genuine righteousness. The tax collector, on the other hand, knew that he was a bad lot. He would not lift up his eyes to heaven but beat his breast and cried, “*Kyrie, eleison!*” He was accepted by God because he threw himself on God's mercy”. Fr. Roger Karban in his 2004 article for *The Evangelist* adds this comment on how the first reading and the Gospel reading are connected – “In the Gospel (Luke 18: 9-14), Jesus reveals what’s at the heart of such a relationship. God doesn’t respond to us because we can produce a list of accomplishments. On the contrary, those who consistently fall back on such lists don’t have the "righteousness" God expects. Remember, this parable of the two praying Jews is directed to "those who were convinced of their own righteousness and despised everyone else." The Pharisee presumes his list demands God’s attention. "O God," he prays, "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." He has a right to Yahweh’s ear. Meanwhile, the sin-conscious employee of an army of occupation "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," Jesus announces, "the tax collector went home justified, not the former; for those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.””

John J. Pilch in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle C* adds these cultural comments on today’s Gospel – “The editor of this scene clearly identifies the focus of this parable: those who trusted in themselves as being righteous and who scorned others. In Luke's story line this is unmistakably the Pharisees and lawyers.

THE PHARISEE

If Christians know the Pharisees only from New Testament information, they are badly informed and the impression is erroneous. Precious little of the New Testament gives a fair report or interpretation of them. Pharisees were one of a number of factions in the world of Jesus. They formed a “fellowship” (*haburah* in Hebrew) whose members practiced distinctive observances of prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and tithing. In the parable, the Pharisee's prayer is self-focused, just like Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1:46-56) and Simeon's Canticle (2:29-31). Unlike those prayers, however, the Pharisee's has an unmistakable elitist edge (“not like other people . . . especially that tax-agent,” v. 10) spelled out in the details of his piety. His disclaimer (“not rapacious, unrighteous, adulterer”) is falsified in Luke's story line. Jesus accuses the Pharisees of being full of rapacity (11:39), money lovers (16:14), and—implied by juxtaposition—adulterers (16:18).

THE TAX AGENT

The Greek word most often translated as “publican” or “tax collector” can describe three categories of people in the first century: (1) those who purchased the right from government to collect specific taxes; (2) supervisory officials, regional directors, like Zacchaeus (a “chief” collector or agent); and (3) employees or agents who collected indirect taxes through tolls at major transport and commercial centers like Jericho and

Capernaum. Members of this third category of agents were employed by higher authorities, hence the Baptist urges that they collect no more than is “appointed” (Luke 3:12-12). Someone else has set the rates. While despised and avoided by the Pharisees, tax agents formed one of the groups that responded to the prophet John and the prophet Jesus. The tax agent in this parable presents a humble contrast to the puffed-up Pharisee. He stands far off and adopts the customary posture for prayer: arms crossed over the chest and eyes cast downward. To strike the breast is a Middle-Eastern gesture peculiar to women (Luke 23:27). Men use it only in extreme anguish, as here and likely in Luke 23:48. The tax agent simply repeats: “God have mercy on me. I am a sinner.” Or as we noted about mercy above, “God give me what you owe me. Fulfill your interpersonal obligation to me. I am a sinner.” The Pharisee thought he had it all sewed up, but the tax agent was the one God justified (v. 14). The Pharisee needed nothing; the tax agent recognized he needed God.

CONCLUSION

The final saying about exalting and humbling self is known as a “floating saying.” It appears here and in 14:11, both stories aimed in criticism at the Pharisees. Other forms of this wisdom occur in Matt 18:4; 23:12; Jas 4:6, 10; and 1 Pet 5:6. From the cultural perspective of honor and shame, one must always guard against making a hollow claim or a claim that can be easily dismissed. Sitting in the wrong place is risky; sitting lower and being invited higher is wiser. But the verb in this saying is in the “theological” passive voice, something quite common in the Bible. In passive voice constructions the agent is not mentioned but can be deduced from the context. In the Bible, when no human agent is identified, the agent is then understood to be “God.” Thus whoever humbles self will be exalted (by God, of course); and whoever exalts self, will be humbled (by God, of course). In other words, this is another story of divine reversal. God's ways are not the way humans think and plan. Most people go through life and tally successes and failures. Believers sometimes can discover in their so-called failures examples of divine reversals, a better plan, a more rewarding venture. What looks initially like a set-back can be an opportunity for course correction”.

Joe Juellich, Liturgy Team