

THIRTIETH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME [C]

Ecclesiasticus 35: 12 - 14, 16 - 19

2 Timothy 4: 6- 8, 16 - 18

Luke 18: 9 - 14

When Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio became Pope Francis, he certainly broke the mould of what the world expects a Pope to be like.

He's very much his own man; or, to be more precise, he is Jesus's man, in that he wants everyone to see the beautiful features of the Saviour reflected in His Body, the Church.

One of the mould-breaking things he's done is to let a journalist have an in-depth interview with him, without the questions being submitted to him in advance for approval.

And the first question the journalist put to him was: 'Who is Jorge Mario Bergoglio?'

His answer was not what one would expect; not what I would think of saying to anyone, let alone a journalist: 'I do not know what might be the most fitting description [Pope Francis said]. I am a sinner. This is the most accurate definition. It is not a figure of speech. I am a sinner.'

What an astounding, and transparently honest thing to say.

Pope Francis is most certainly firmly placing himself under the mercy of God, just as the tax-collector in the Gospel does.

Although, on the surface, this Parable Jesus tells: "To some people who prided themselves on being virtuous and despised everyone else." Lk. 18: 9 seems to just be about: "Two men [who] went up to the Temple to pray." Lk. 18: 10

The Pharisee says of himself: "I thank you, God, that I am not a sinner like everyone else. For I don't cheat, I don't sin, and I don't commit adultery. I'm certainly not like that tax collector! I fast twice a week, and I give you a tenth of my income." Lk. 18: 11 - 12

By his own admission he's a fine upstanding man without any faults, but that's where his argument wears very thin.

He's not being a realist. He's not acknowledging that he's a frail human being who's fallen short of perfection.

That would be bad enough - a bad case of pride - but the Pharisee is even worse than that.

Instead of entering his Father's house as a house of prayer, a place to find the mercy and forgiveness of God, he's turned it into a law court where he's the judge and jury rolled into one.

The Pharisee says to the Lord: "I am not a sinner like everyone else, [and] certainly not like that tax-collector!" Lk. 18: 11 & 12

He's looked at the tax-collector as if he's a bit of dirt on his shoes, not a person made in the image of God.

Whereas the tax-collector, like Pope Francis, is absolutely honest with the Lord about himself; He says: "O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner." Lk. 18: 13

I would like people to think that I'm the same as the tax-collector but, in reality, I'm more often than not like the Pharisee: perhaps you're the same?

Today, Jesus is challenging us to rethink how we think, and behave, and act toward others by speaking to us directly in the Gospel.

For if we come before the Lord at the Eucharist this evening/morning thinking that we're better than the person next to us, then we're no better than the Pharisee.

If we come before the Lord at the Eucharist this evening/morning without being honest about our need for God's mercy, then we're no better than the Pharisee.

But if we come to the Lord in all honesty and sincerity, knowing that without Him we're nothing, we will, as Jesus says of the tax-collector, go home: "Justified by God." Lk. 18: 14

Those merciful words of Jesus show us the depth of God's love towards us frail and sinful people if we admit our faults and failings with honesty and true humility, and thank the Lord for His mercy.

Now, when we listen to what Paul has to say about himself in our second reading we may think he sounds more like the Pharisee than the tax-collector.

He says: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." 2 Tim. 4: 7
Before Paul became a Christian he was a zealous Pharisee who believed, like the Pharisee in the Parable, that he was on the fast-track to God.

After he met The Risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, though, his life was turned around, and he became a new and different man.

We can't rest on our laurels, and think we're in the Catholic first-class compartment to God either. Whoever - whatever - we are, we must walk with Jesus, and come to know Him, through the daily paths we travel every day.

And, although we live in a City with two universities, you can't know Jesus only with your mind: and although I worked for many years in one of the greatest libraries in the world, you can't know Jesus simply by reading the Catechism in the peace of a library.

Of course, we can study, and essentially know Jesus through the Catechism, and through the teaching of His Church; but it's not enough just to understand Jesus through the mind.

It's necessary to know Him in conversation with Him, talking with Him, in prayer.

If you don't pray, if you don't talk with Jesus, you don't know Him.

Yes, you might know things about Jesus, but it doesn't go with that knowledge that your heart gives in prayer.

To know Jesus with the mind; to know Jesus with the heart, in prayer, in dialogue with Him, this help us immensely, but it's not sufficient.

There's a third path to know Jesus: it's following Him; to go with Him, to walk with Him.

It's only in communicating with Jesus in these three 'languages' that we can truly know Him

Many people are intrigued by Jesus, and ask: 'Who is this Jesus?'

'Well,' Jesus says to us, 'if you want to know who I am, read what Scripture tells you about me, talk to me in prayer, and walk on the path with me; then you'll really know who I am.'

Then, unlike the Pharisee in the Parable who thinks he's righteous through his own efforts, we'll know - like Paul - that any righteousness we have is founded on Jesus.

And, along with Paul, who trusted totally in the mercy of God, our reward is to have the crown of righteousness given to us on that day when he go to meet the Lord.

Jesus will give that crown of righteousness to all who love Him, and: "Have longed for his appearing."
2 Tim. 4: 8

A crown we can't earn. A crown we don't deserve. A crown not made out of our own efforts to be holy.

Instead a crown made out of that most precious commodity: the love Jesus had for us when He poured out His life on the Cross.

May we pour our lives out in service of the Lord, and one another; and long for that moment when He calls us to Himself to receive the crown of eternal life.

Knowing that, yes, I'm a sinner; but I'm standing under the mercy of God, washed clean in: "The precious blood of Christ, the sinless, spotless Lamb of God." 1 Pt. 1: 19