

Despising the Tax Collector

Thirtieth Sunday

October 23, 2016

Gospel - Luke 18:9-14

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."



Reflection

The Pharisee who was praying to himself died and knocked at the doors of heaven. A familiar face opened the doors for him. "I know you", said the pharisee. "You are that tax collector who was in the temple when I was praying to God". "That's right". "How come are you here?". "God has reconciled the world to Himself in Jesus Christ", said the tax collector with a smile. "If you are here, I am not coming in", the Pharisee shouted angrily. Then, he turned his back on God's offer of salvation. He was unable to comprehend how it was possible that someone, who did not fast twice a week and would not offer tithes from all that he got, could make it to heaven.

Asia remains a missionary challenge. So far, the evangelising efforts of the Church with the exception of the Philippines and East Timor failed. The scholars explain that failure in many ways. Some argue that the alliance of the sword and the cross during the period of colonisation undermined the power of the Gospel. Others claim that Christianity came to Asia too late, when all other major religions had already established their presence here. For centuries, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam has shaped the life of Asian people and missionary efforts could not change this reality. But, there is one more theory, which states that pride of the nations has been the main hindrance to the acceptance of the message of the Gospel.

The last prophet of the Old Testament at the end of his book ushered this call: "Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel" (Malachi 4:4). In order to fulfil it, the Pharisees separated themselves from others and strictly adhered to all the commandments of the law. They worked hard to become blameless as to righteousness under the law and they had the reasons to be proud of themselves. Paradoxically, that strict adherence to the law closed them to the message of the Gospel. Jesus could touch the hearts of tax-collectors and sinners but was unable to convert the Pharisees - with few exceptions. They stumbled over the stumbling stone - faith in Christ. Pursuing by their own efforts a law of righteousness, they did not succeed in reaching that law because true righteousness comes by faith (see Rom 9:30-34).

If you arrived in Macao in the sixteenth century, you would read an inscription on the gate leading to the mainland: "Fear our power, admire our virtues". What can you offer to a nation that considers itself the centre of the world? Most nations derive their names from their ethnic roots - Germany from the Germanic tribes and France from the Flanders - but China is known as the Middle Kingdom and its emperor was considered to be the son of heaven. Mencius (372-289 BC) said: "I have heard of men using the doctrines of our great land to change barbarians, but I have never yet heard of any being changed by the barbarians". Did he know Socrates or Plato? Did he know any of the Jewish prophets? With such attitude, could the Middle Kingdom receive the Kingdom of God from the barbarians from the West?

Pride is on the list of seven deadly sins. It is considered to be the source of all other sins and the vice of fools. A pride person irrationally believes to be better, superior, or more important than others. Dante defined this vice as "love of self, perverted to hatred and contempt for one's neighbour". The Pharisee admired his personal image and refused to acknowledge his own limitations, faults, and wrongs. But God did not like it. The book of Proverbs tells us that the Lord hates haughty eyes (Prov 6:17) and that "pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov 16:18). We also read in the letters of the apostles of Christ that "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5).

The Pharisee in his prayer not only prided himself on his virtues but also intentionally shamed the tax-collector. This is yet another awful quality of pride, namely deriving pleasure from shaming others. If he thought that by ill-treating the tax-collector he would make his superiority greater, then he was wrong. We sing today that "the Lord hears the cry of the poor" (Ps 34:7), because "the prayer of the lowly pierces the clouds" (Sirach 35:16). It was a humble prayer of the shamed tax-collector that touched the heart of God. That is why he and not the proud Pharisee went down to his house justified. "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 18:14).

It is painful to be humbled. Our ego is injured and our self-esteem is lowered. Yet, there is no other way to experience God's grace of salvation. Pride has to give way to humility and contempt for others to charity. The pharisees among us need to realise that nobody is perfect, nobody can claim that he or she is blameless. We all have our shortcomings and commit various sins. The pharisees among us have to learn that short, simple, and sincere prayer of the tax collector: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" (Luke 18:13).

Questions

1. In your view, what is the main obstacle to the message of the Gospel?
2. Do you consider pride as a virtue or as a vice? Why?
3. Is there any particular person or group of people that you despise? Why?
4. What should the pharisee do in order to experience God's justification?