

TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Joel 2:23-32 and Psalm 65; 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14

In the second chapter of the letter to the Ephesians Paul writes these words: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from you; it is the gift of God; it is not from works, so no one may boast”.

These words from St Paul help us to understand the Gospel reading today, as well as the readings we heard from the Prophet Joel and from Paul’s Second Letter to Timothy.

The message of Joel concerns the Day of the Lord, when God will deliver his people from their afflictions, the day of vindication, of salvation, for those whom God has called.

In the Second Reading this morning we heard St. Paul giving Timothy his final instructions and telling Timothy about his own death and what he expects. Paul makes no mention of his virtues, only those of Christ Himself.

The church has long called the message of Christ Jesus, the Gospel, the Good News. The Good News is based on two simple facts: The first fact is that we are all sinful and separated from God by our sinfulness. No one is holy enough to bear God’s scrutiny. And the second fact is that God loves us anyway. We are of great value to God, not because of what we do, but because of who we are. We are God’s creation, created in God’s own image to be friends of God. The question is, will we humble ourselves, will we repent with fasting and tears and mourning and enter into the rest, the peace, that God freely

offers us.

Today's Gospel story is a reminder that it is not what we have done, or failed to do, that justifies us in the eyes of God; a reminder that what pleases God is not our goodness when compared to others, but rather the state of our hearts, and whether or not we have a deep longing for the mercy of God, and for the appearing of the Lord.

None of us would probably prayer like the Pharisee prayed. We, after all, believe in the good news, we believe in the Gospel, and we know better than the Pharisees. Jesus said at the very end of the story that everyone who exalts themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted. And we agree that people who think that they are better than everyone else are a true pain in the neck, that people who think they can earn their way into heaven are terribly misguided, that people who compare themselves to others are setting themselves, and others, up for trouble.

Do those of us gathered here today understand just how we, whether we want to or not, do, in fact, compare ourselves to one another and do, as the Pharisee did, take comfort from the fact that we are not as foolish, not as misguided, not as sinful, as some other poor foolish, misguided, and sinful persons? Do we understand just how we, whether we want to or not, do in fact think about how much more we do for God than some other people?

It is a human condition, this condition of making judgements about ourselves and about others, a condition that is widespread, a condition that is, if we pause to think about it for a while, truly depressing. In fact, judging ourselves better than others, is such a widespread condition, that it is one of the things that we need to be saved from. It is one of things that demonstrates our need

for the totally undeserved, the totally unearned, grace and love of God.

Now, back to the parable. After the Pharisee has prayed his prayer of thanksgiving to God, the tax collector comes up to bat.

He stood at a distance, like all of us who insist on sitting at the back of the church. He would not even look up to heaven, but he beat his breast and said: “God have mercy on me, a sinner”

This cry of the tax-collector is the basis of what we now call the Jesus Prayer, the prayer that, in one form or another, is recommended to us by many in the church as a continuing refrain, that we should lift up before God: Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

And so Jesus ends the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee by saying, “I tell you, this man, (that is the Tax Collector), rather than the other (that is the Pharisee), went home justified before God; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted”. It is hard to avoid making judgements about other people. So the best thing we can do is to be humble, and to think not of how we might be better than some others, or of how some others might be worse than us, but rather to think of who we are before God. As St. Paul said, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from you; it is the gift of God”.

Many Christians still find it hard to think that God doesn't judge us according to my deeds. For many it is a challenge to really understand that God loves us, regardless. We still find it difficult, from time to time, to understand the truth that says, “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us”. But that is the truth. So rejoice in it, even though at times we have a hard time accepting it. Rejoice because we know that God loves us even more than a parent loves his or her wayward child, and that

even as such a parent will welcome home a prodigal child, so God will welcome us when we long for his coming, when we humble ourselves and admit to ourselves, and to God, that we are in need. We are all poor sinners that God has reached down from on high to save.

Today as we pray together, recall the pray of the tax collector, and the message of Jesus. Recall the Gospel deep in our hearts, and know that God loves us sinners, and that God wants us to come before Him and offer to Him all of our own imperfect self, that God wants us to come so that He can take away our fear, our anger, our helplessness, and our pride, to heal us and bless us richly. Come, seek mercy, not because us are holy, but because we are not. Come, ask to be blessed, not because we deserve it but because we do not. Come, follow Jesus, not because we are worthy, but because Christ Himself seeks to work in us and through us to heal and make right all that is wrong.

AMEN.