

COMING CLEAN WITH GOD: 30TH SUNDAY C

I once knew a priest, now deceased, who was always telling his people that only he and his housekeeper would get to heaven. Needless to say his congregation got smaller and smaller. I was reminded of this when thinking about the story Jesus told of the two men who went into the House of God to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a tax-collector.

The Pharisee is not a bad man. In fact the people listening to Jesus regard him as a model citizen. He does everything expected of him and more. He fasts once a week as required by his religion, but also on one extra day. He gives not only one tenth of his farm products to the Temple, as required, but also one tenth of everything else he earns. He is faithful to his wife, and in his dealings with fellow men and women, he is neither greedy nor unjust.

On the other hand, the people listening to Jesus regard the tax collector as a rogue, a villain, and a traitor. There are plenty that would rough him up, if they could. For as a tax collector for the occupying Romans, he has been making money from the sufferings of his fellow-Jews, cheating and swindling them.

Yet it is the shady tax collector, who goes home 'OK' with God, not the respectable Pharisee. God accepts the villain, but rejects the saint. We have to ask: 'What's going on here? Why is it so?' The difference is in their fundamental attitude to God, the way that each of them prays before God. The Pharisee does not really go to the House of God to pray, but only to tell God and himself just what a fine fellow he is, and just how bad other people are. What he says is not really a prayer, only a piece of proud and arrogant boasting. Deep down he does not feel any need for God.

The tax collector, on the other hand, far from standing up and telling God how good he is, stands just inside the back door. As he thinks of all the wrong things he has done, he cannot bring himself even to look up. He just keeps beating his chest with his fist, and saying over and over again: 'O God have mercy on me, because I've been a real rogue, to you and just about everybody else. And please help me. I need your assistance much more than I say.'

Brothers and Sisters! It's important for you and me to remember that Jesus first told this story to 'people who prided themselves on being virtuous and despised everyone else'. For Jesus knew that good religious people sometimes have a tendency to add up their religious devotions and practices before God, and tell God just how wonderful they are. He knew too how good and religious people sometimes become self-righteous, on the one hand, and critical and contemptuous of others, on the other hand. He knew too that to outsiders, to people who don't go to church, self-righteous people can seem hypocrites, phonies in fact. He knew too what a mess their arrogance can make of their prayers.

So today, Jesus Christ, present among us, and speaking to us again in the words of this powerful gospel story, is reminding us of three helpful home truths: -

1. No proud person can pray sincerely. Every one of us has the need to see ourselves as we really are before God – to see ourselves therefore as sinners, and yet sinners loved by God, embraced by God, and hugged by God. Every one of us needs to humbly ask this God of mercy to forgive our past mistakes and to give us the help, healing and

strength we need to live in God's way through the rest of our time on earth.

2. No one who despises and condemns their fellow human-beings can pray properly. For in prayer we don't lift ourselves above others, but come before God as one of a great mob of sinning, suffering, struggling human beings. (The sense of his own sinfulness used to lead Archbishop Lanfranc, a famous Catholic Archbishop of Canterbury, to get down on his knees with every penitent, and pray for forgiveness of his own sins, before presuming to hear the sins of others in confession).
3. Everything good about us comes from God. Everything bad about us comes from ourselves. True prayer comes from setting our lives before God just as they are. In the light of God's goodness, in the light of the life of Jesus, we have nothing to boast about. All that is left to us is to thank God for the many good things about us, and, like the tax collector, to pray about the evil that is ours: 'O God, be merciful to me a sinner. Help me, cleanse me, and change me.' All that is left for us is to heed the gentle invitation of God in that popular hymn, an invitation which Christ speaks to us in our holy communion today, our sharing with him.

Come as you are, that's how I want you.
Come as you are, feel quite at home.
Close to my heart, loved and forgiven;
Come as you are, why stand alone?

Come as you are, that's how I love you.
Come as you are, trust me again.
Nothing can change the love that I bear you.
All will be well, just come as you are.

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