

Sunday 30:C

Upper Room Conference: Launching Proclaim

Vancouver Convention Centre

26 October 2019

Your Eminence, Bishop David, dear brother priests and deacons, consecrated men and women, and lay faithful of the Archdiocese of Vancouver:

Introduction

Today is truly a day the Lord has made, and we are rejoicing in it! I want to thank all of you, especially our speakers, presenters and organizers, for enabling us to embrace with enthusiasm the call to be partners in the Proclaim Movement we are launching. The Spirit of God is moving among us, inviting us to become closer to Jesus in our daily lives and to share with others the gift of faith we have received.

Just look around you – a thousand or more disciples ready, as the Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy to be poured out as a libation, that is, in sacrifice for the sake of the Gospel (cf. 2 Tim 4:6). The Lord is expecting a lot from us to whom so much has been given (cf. Lk 12:48). At the end of Mass, you will be asked to step forward and commit yourself to being a joyful missionary disciple who will proclaim Jesus wherever he leads you.

Today's Gospel

Now to a brief – or maybe not so brief – reflection on today's Gospel.

It speaks not just about two ways of praying – one false, that of the Pharisee; and the other authentic, that of the tax collector – but of two ways of standing before God himself. The question posed, of course, is which one am I? the Pharisee or the tax collector?

How do I stand before God? What people think about me may well be wrong. What I think about myself may be an illusion. What is true is about me is how God sees me. He cannot be deceived. About me, he knows the truth.

The Pharisee embodies an attitude which, while it begins piously enough with “God, I thank you” (Lk 18:11), is really an attack on others. In his prayer, he doesn’t express thanksgiving to God for his blessings and his mercy, but rather because “he is not like other people” (Lk 18:11). He uses the occasion to review for himself a list of his supposed virtues. This is the real problem: the pharisee thinks he is praying to God, but in truth he is praying only to himself! “Instead of having the Lord before his eyes, he has a mirror. Although he is standing in the Temple, he doesn’t feel the need to prostrate himself before the majesty of God; he remains standing, he feels secure, as if he were the master of the Temple!”¹

“What is the most dangerous attitude for every Christian life? It is

¹ Francis, General Audience (1 June 2016).

pride. It is the attitude of those who stand before God thinking that they always have their affairs in order with him. The proud are like the Pharisee who thinks he is praying in the Temple, but in reality, he is commending himself before God.²

Then what's wrong with this picture? Why is the Pharisee judged to be a failure? St. Luke, in introducing the parable tells us: "Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and regarded others with contempt" (Lk 18:9). He thought that what made him "righteous" or pleasing in God's sight was his own law-abiding activity. The Pharisee imagined that he had a clean slate and looked down arrogantly at all others.³ No "through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault" for this Pharisee!

To make matters even worse, the Pharisee judges others harshly from his pedestal. This kind of criticism is rife in our world, and even in the Church. It is a way the devil sneaks in, under the guise of self-righteousness to wreck havoc.

Standing far off, not even looking up to heaven and beating his breast (cf. Lk 18:13), is the tax collector. He doesn't stack up his words

² Cf. Francis, General Audience (10 April 2019).

³ Cf. Walter J. Burghardt, *Still Proclaiming Your Wonders* (New York/Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1984), 141.

in praying. On the contrary, his prayer is humble, sober, pervaded by a consciousness of his own unworthiness. Here is a man who truly realizes that he needs God's forgiveness and his mercy: "be merciful to me, a sinner!" (Lk 18:13), he cries out. Nothing more. A beautiful prayer! This prayer, as the first reading says, "will reach to the clouds" (Sir 35:20).⁴

If the Pharisee asked for nothing because he thought he already had everything, the tax collector can only beg for God's mercy of God. Recognizing himself to be a sinner, the tax collector shows us what is necessary in order to receive the Lord's forgiveness. In the end, he is the one, so despised, who becomes an icon of the true believer. The tax collector is the one who goes home "justified" (Lk 18:14), pleasing to God, because he doesn't trust in himself but in the Lord's mercy..

The Lord comes for us when we recognize that we are sinners. If we are like the Pharisee, then we do not know the Lord's heart, and we will never have the joy of experiencing this mercy!

What Jesus is warning us about in the parable is the temptation of thinking that "I" save my own soul by a show of virtue, by thinking that good works will save me. Long ago St. John of the Cross wrote: "Christians should keep in mind that the value of their good works, fasts, alms, penances, and so on, is not based on quantity or quality so much as

⁴ Cf. Francis, Homily (27 October 2013).

on the love of God practiced in them.”⁵

We do not lift ourselves to heaven by our own bootstraps. Certainly, we can thank the Lord if he has enabled us to keep his commandments – that is his grace at work in us – and we are right to recognize that. But such thankfulness must also be accompanied by the tax collector’s words: “God, be merciful to me a sinner” (Lk 18:13).

And another small point. This has to do with our temptation – and it is a real temptation – to take comfort in comparing ourselves to others, usually those we can point to as seemingly more “unworthy” than ourselves. To raise ourselves up, so often we put others down.

Taking the words of the tax collector in the parable, should we not rather paraphrase what he says to this? “God, I thank you that I am like other people” (cf. Lk 18:11). “I thank you that, like everyone else, I have been created in your image and likeness, that I have been forgiven by the Crucified Jesus and embraced by him, that I have him for a Brother and Saviour, just like everyone else; I thank him that, he is calling me, like everyone else in this room, to be a joyful missionary disciple called to proclaim the Good News.”⁶

⁵ St. John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 3.27.5, in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, rev. ed. (Washington: ICS Publications, 1991), 317.

⁶ Cf. Walter J. Burghardt, *Still Proclaiming Your Wonders* (New York/Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1984), 141.

Conclusion

This Saviour comes to us now as we continue this Eucharist, asking humbly for the grace to acknowledge our need for his mercy and, because we are baptized and sent, to commit ourselves to proclaiming Jesus and his Gospel.

✦ J. Michael Miller, CSB
Archbishop of Vancouver