

REFLECTION

In our Gospel reading from Luke, Jesus tells a parable addressed “to those who were convinced of their own righteousness and despised everyone else.” When we look at the division and conflict and war in the world, it seems to me that often the cause of all this violence is the very same attitude that Jesus addresses. Throughout history, groups of people have oppressed other groups of people, convincing themselves that they were righteous in doing so. People have participated in “ethnic cleansing” and genocide, convinced that the ones whom they were trying to exterminate were less deserving of life than themselves. Sometimes we carry that attitude in our personal lives. While we may not despise *everyone* else, we can be convinced of our own righteousness, confident that our resentment of another person is totally justified.

Whether we are prejudiced against entire groups of people, or resentful of an individual, Jesus seeks to lead us to a different attitude. In the parable that Jesus tells, there is a Pharisee who takes his position in the temple area and begins to pray: “O God, I thank you that I am not like rest of humanity—greedy, dishonest, adulterous—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, and I pay tithes on my whole income.” While giving thanks and fasting and paying tithes are worthwhile activities, we can see that what the Pharisee says can hardly be called prayer. He is more concerned with God knowing his righteousness than in doing God’s will. He is blind to his own sin of pride. When we have the attitude of the Pharisee, it can be easy to pass judgment. It can be easy to delude ourselves, and say, “I’m better than he,” or “We’re better than they” (How often have I been judgmental towards those I consider judgmental!) And to prove the correctness of those statements, we then attribute to others characteristics such as laziness, or greed, or a desire to take over, or even evil. And all too often violence becomes the tool of fear and hatred.

What is to be our response? Perhaps we can learn from the other person in Jesus’ parable. The tax collector, to whom the Pharisee refers, approaches the temple area in a different way. He does not even lift his head, but instead beats his breast and says, “O God be merciful to me a sinner.” The tax collector is well aware of his sin. When we repent of our sin, we are more likely to be open to God’s will, as we accept God’s love. This last point is very important! Sometimes we can get stuck in self-reproach, which often leads us to despise everyone else *as well* as ourselves. But if we can accept the love of Jesus Christ for us, and as we are made more and more aware of God’s mercy to us, it becomes harder to pass judgment on others. The harder it is to pass judgment, the more difficult it is to justify discrimination, and the more difficult it is to condone violence against another. Like the tax collector, we are called to be humble and repentant before our loving God.

The closer we come to Jesus, and know of God’s love for us, the more we see the plight of others. Our pride does not blind us, as it did the Pharisee. Instead, we recognize the truth of the words of Sirach, in our first reading. We believe that God *does* hear “the cry of the oppressed,” that He is “not deaf to the wail of the orphan, nor to the widow when she pours out her complaint.” And so we are called to reach out to the oppressed, to the poor, and to those forgotten and abandoned by society, the “widows” and “orphans” of our time. We are called to cross those barriers that we have built between “us” and “them.” This will not make us popular. Look at St. Paul in our second reading from 2 Timothy. He sees that he is near the end of his life; that he will most likely be martyred for his faith. Judging from what is written, no one came to support him in his trial. “But,” Paul writes, “the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the proclamation may be completed and all the Gentiles might hear it.” The zealous Jew became the apostle to the Gentiles, and even in his sufferings the mission was fulfilled.

In all humility, then, we are called to share the love and mercy of Christ which has been so lavishly bestowed upon us! We are called to reach out to those in need, and help build up the kingdom of God. We are called to turn away from prejudice and violence towards those who are different. And when our time comes, may we be able to say, with St. Paul, “I have competed well. I have finished the race; I have kept the faith.”

May God continue to bless us all, and may He bring us “safe to his heavenly kingdom.”

In Christ,

Fr. Phil, CP