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30th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Date: Sunday, October 23, 2016 | **Season:** Ordinary Time after Easter | **Year:** C
First Reading: Sirach 35:12–14, 16–18
Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 34:2–3, 17–19, 23 | **Response:** Psalm 34:7a
Second Reading: 2 Timothy 4:6–8, 16–18
Gospel Acclamation: 2 Corinthians 5:19
Gospel Reading: Luke 18:9–14
Preached at: the Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Braamfontein **in the** Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa**.**

At the heart of today's readings is, I think, the distinction between a gift and a reward. God is always gifting us, blessing us, and bestowing grace upon us. It is not something we can ever earn or take for granted, rather we can only say how unworthy we are of it and thank God for his abundant generosity.

Last week we read in the Gospel how the widow prayed constantly and did not lose heart. So last week's lesson was that we must always pray. Immediately following that parable, we have today's Gospel which is a warning about how we should pray. A prayer that is self-referencing, self-directed is not one that can reach God. We read in the first reading that it is the prayer of the humble that pierces the clouds, and in the psalm we heard how the poor man cried and the Lord heard him.

The Gospel passage speaks about two ways of praying, a false way—that of the Pharisee—and an authentic way—that of the tax collector.

The Pharisee is by all accounts a good person, or someone who tries to be good – doing everything good people are expected to do. His prayer would not be unusual in Jewish society. But there is something wrong with it. We hear how the Pharisee stood and prayed with himself. He is being totally self-referential. This is the problem. The Pharisee embodies an attitude which does not express thanksgiving to God for his blessings and his mercy, but rather self-satisfaction. The Pharisee feels himself justified, he feels his life is in order, he boasts of this, and he judges others from his pedestal.

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The tax collector, on the other hand, does not multiply words. His prayer is humble, sober, pervaded by a consciousness of his own unworthiness, of his own needs. We know the tax collector is humble because of the four things the Gospel says about him. It describes him as standing far off; keeping his eyes lowered; beating his breast as a sign of repentance and crying out for mercy. He does not list every one of his sins to God. They are too many. Tax collectors were not good people in the time of the Roman Empire. They were thieves, stealing not from the rich, but exploiting the poor. It was written in the Jewish law that if a tax collector wished to be saved, he had to return everything he had taken plus 20% interest and change professions immediately. This led the rabbis to agree that salvation for tax collectors was almost impossible. Jesus knew this – but he used the tax collector as his example that authentic prayer to the Father consists in simply admitting our need for God's forgiveness and mercy.

The prayer of the tax collector is the prayer of the poor man, a prayer pleasing to God. It is a prayer which, as the first reading says, "will reach to the clouds", unlike the prayer of the Pharisee, which is weighed down by vanity.

So if today's readings are all about the right attitude to have in our prayer, then there are three things I'd like to suggest we try to remember.

The first thing I would suggest we could take from today is an understanding of God's Justice. God is Just, says Ben Sira in the first reading, not because he grants each person what the person deserves, but because he saves the poor and listens to the cries of the miserable and the defenseless. We need this understanding so that we can recognize which prayers God is wanting to answer.

The second thing, is to ask ourselves how we pray. Perhaps before that, we must ask ourselves, do we pray? Do we pray alone? Do we pray as a family? Not in a complex way, but with the simple attitude of the tax collector who recognized that he needed God. Prayer by ourselves should not be like the Pharisee with ourselves. We should recognize we need God, and pray for others in our lives. Prayer in the family could be as simple as remembering to pray before or after a meal. Or to pray the Our Father together, or the Rosary. But most importantly, the simple prayer of the tax collector is just to acknowledge that we need God in our lives. And we can thank God for sending us each other. This can be done easily in the family. The husband could pray for his wife, the wife for her hus-

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band, both together for their children, the children for their grandparents … but praying for each other's good. How often do we hear Pope Francis say "pray for me." We need to pray for each other.

The final thing I'd suggest we could consider is how we keep our faith? In the second reading Paul exclaims "I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." But allow me to share a story. This past week the Jesuit Institute hosted the head of the English section of Vatican Radio, a South African lay man called Seàn-Patrick Lovett. He told us many stories – he had to, he has worked in the Vatican as a journalist under five popes – so there was lots to tell! But one story has stuck with me, and I think it has some bearing on today's Gospel. It was the story of how the cardinals, after Pope Benedict resigned, each got to speak for 5 minutes to each other so that they could get to know each other. He recounted what a little-known Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio said. We all know that Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio was to become Pope Francis. In fact Cardinal Bergoglio only spoke for three and a half of those five minutes. But what was it that he said in those three and a half minutes that convinced the Cardinals to elect him as Pope Francis? Like the Pharisee in today's gospel, who was self-referential in his prayer, Cardinal Bergolgio thought that the evils that, over time, happen in the church have their root in self-referentiality. Seàn-Patrick told us that Cardinal Bergoglio stood up in the hall and said: "In the book of Revelation, Jesus says that he is standing at the door and he knocks. Obviously, many think that the text refers to his knocking from the outside in order to come in. But I think it is not like this. I think, in our day we have trapped Jesus, and Jesus is knocking from within so that we can let him come out. A self-referential church keeps Jesus Christ within herself and does not let him out," "Put simply, there are two images of the Church: a Church which evangelises and comes out of herself" by hearing the word of God with reverence and proclaiming it with faith; and "the worldly Church, living within herself, of herself, for herself." What Pope Francis says here about the Church, I think Paul is saying about each Christian.

Paul kept the faith because he didn't just defend it, but proclaimed it, spread it, brought it to distant lands. He stood up to all those who wanted to preserve, to "embalm" the message of Christ within the limits of Palestine. He did not want the Good News to be imprisoned – to remain solely something for the Jewish Christians – he wanted to tell the Good News to everyone, spreading it to the

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Gentiles. Like Pope Francis, he didn't want us to lock Jesus away in our hearts. That is why St Paul made courageous decisions, he went into hostile territory, he let himself be challenged by distant peoples and different cultures, he spoke frankly and fearlessly. Saint Paul kept the faith because, in the same way that he received it, he gave it away, he went out to the fringes, and didn't dig himself into defensive positions. And he receives the 'crown of righteousness'. At the time that Paul is writing, Crowns were commonly given as rewards in the arena to the victors of a race. But Paul is using this analogy to show how God will treat those who run the race of faith. This does not turn him into the Pharisee. No – because he recognizes that this crown is a pure gift from God. Offered in spite of his actions, rather than because of them. The crown is not so much an external reward but the gift of faith that made it possible for, and gave him the reason to run, in the first place.

Here we see again the distinction between gift and reward. In the Gospel the tax collector is totally aware that he deserves no reward – indeed it is impossible for him to earn it. But he still comes to the temple to pray, aware that God's gift is possible for him too.

We can pray perhaps, like the tax collector, for a renewed relationship with God that just begins by us each praying to God in words as simple as, "I need you, I love you, help me." God will surely help us to run our race to a glorious completion. We just have to take the first step.

And if our prayer is sincere and authentic, then we cannot hide our faith. We cannot keep it private. Just as our prayer cannot solely be all about ourselves, our faith cannot be imprisoned or hidden either. We should allow it to shine forth and to influence every decision we make. Let us acknowledge it as the source and inspiration of our actions. Because faith is a gift. And like all good gifts, if it was good enough to receive, it must be good enough to share!

Let us pray this week that we might be gifted with the grace to pray like the tax collector – with simplicity and honesty – not dwelling on how bad we've been, but just stating how much we need God. Then God, in his justice, will hear our cries.

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Let us also pray that we will not, as Pope Francis asked, keep Jesus locked away in our hearts, but we would be given the grace and the courage to allow Jesus to lead us outwards, into new relationships, into new ways of proclaiming God's Good News. In sharing what we have received, because all gifts, like talents, are meant to be shared.

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