



30th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year C

Homily

**The Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB
Archbishop of Perth**

**Sunday 27 October 2019
Sacred Heart Church, Mundaring Parish**

Today's Gospel, the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, is the second of three stories in chapter 18 of Saint Luke's Gospel which all invite us to reflect on the vital issue of prayer, and what place it has in our daily lives. The parable we have just listened to is preceded by the story we heard last week, the parable of the unjust judge, who finally gives the widow what she wants, not out of generosity or justice but in order to stop her pestering him. Today's story is followed by the story of Jesus reprimanding his disciples for keeping little children away from Jesus, presumably because the disciples think that Jesus is too important and too busy to be distracted by the children who were so keen to meet him. While at first glance this last story may not seem to have too much to do with prayer, in reality Jesus is indicating that the attitude of mind and heart of the children, characterised by their deep and obvious desire to be close to him, is precisely that attitude of mind and heart which disciples of Jesus should bring to their prayer.

One of the things, then, which connects the three stories and makes them such a good basis for our own reflection on what place prayer has in our own lives is the focus on how we approach our prayer and what understanding of God we bring to our prayer. In this sense today's gospel invites us to look deep into ourselves and consider how genuine and honest our prayer really is, and how much it might instead be tinged with pride and arrogance.

You might recall from last weekend's Gospel both the determination of the woman who kept persisting in seeking what she wanted in spite of continuous knock-backs, and also, and more importantly, the difference between the unjust judge who in a sense was forced against his will to respond to the woman, and God who in his mercy and compassion always responds, even if not always in the way we want or according to the timetable we have devised.

The woman was clearly persistent and determined, but what Jesus is really praising and asking from us is trusting faith. It is this, rather than mere stubbornness and determination, which should be at the heart of our prayer. This is why Saint Luke introduces his parable by telling us that Jesus, in telling this story, is wanting to stress "*the need to pray constantly and never lost heart*". It is



also why Saint Luke concludes the story by quoting Jesus as saying, *“When the Son of Man comes, will he find any faith on earth?”*

The need for this trusting faith in the Lord, and in his desire to always do the best for us, is one of the most central and constant themes throughout the whole of the Bible. And it is almost always balanced by accounts of the constant struggle most people have in maintaining this faith in moments of difficulty and challenge. This is, for example, at the very heart of the story of the liberation of the Chosen People from slavery in Egypt, the story we reflect on every year at Easter. In spite of their experience of the saving power of God in setting them free from Egypt, the Israelites, in their forty years of wandering the desert before God led them into the Promised Land, constantly fell into the trap of doubting God’s love and care for them. They wanted freedom, and a new land to call their own, and God had promised this to them, but they wanted it on their own terms, and according to their own timetable, and they struggled to accept that God’s plan might be better than their own. They may have continued to believe in God, although some even wanted to turn away to pagan gods, but they did not have that quality of child-like trust which is at the very heart of faith. They prayed for what they wanted, firm in their belief that they knew what was best for them – and when their prayer was not answered in the way they wanted it to be, they were tempted to turn away from God, and many did.

Today’s gospel confronts us with a different distortion of the real purpose of prayer. While the woman in last week’s story at least realised how needy she was and how unable she was to resolve her own problems, the Pharisee in today’s gospel has no sense of his need for God at all. While at first his prayer sounds like one of gratitude – he begins after all by thanking God – his prayer is really full of pride and of self-reliance. He is not really thanking God: rather he is congratulating himself on how good and generous he is. The tax-collector, sitting down the back of the Temple, is the very opposite. He is full of shame and contrition, deeply aware of his failures and of his need for God’s mercy.

At the end of the parable Jesus insists that it was the tax-collector and not the Pharisee who went home at rights with God, precisely because the tax-collector understood who he really was and who God really was. This in fact is really the purpose of prayer. Rather than being a way of getting what we need or want, prayer is a way of becoming who we are really meant to be. If we can grow in our understanding of God, and of our need for God, we will discover perhaps that what we thought we so desperately needed or wanted is not so important after all. We will learn to live lives of trust and of peace because our hope will be in God, as the tax-collector’s hope was, rather than in ourselves, as was the case with the Pharisee. We will then be at rights with God, and at peace with ourselves.

To keep bringing our needs before God, to do so with humility, honesty, and trusting faith, and to come to our prayer with the openness and simplicity with which the little children came to Jesus: this is what Christian prayer is meant to be. Today then we might make our own the request the first disciples themselves once made of Jesus: Lord, teach us to pray.