

THE EMMAUS SERIES

30th Sunday Year C

Ecclesiasticus 35:12-14; 16-19

2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

Luke 18:9-14

O God be merciful to me a sinner

The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector speaks so clearly to us that it needs little commentary. We can recognise the deep implications Luke saw in this story, when we situate it within the compilation made by the evangelist - that we have followed during the past weeks. As Jesus courageously takes the road to meet his fate, he is giving his final instructions to the disciples he will leave behind. Faith, he has taught them is an obedient openness to God's coming in their lives, and to the plan of God about to reach its moment of climax. Their prayer should be the living expression of this faith, teaching them to trust in the Father who will show his care for them – whatever the difficulties they may have to face. In the end they should see themselves as God's 'unprofitable servants'. Today's short parable sums up what his teaching should have brought home to them – in a few words, everything depends, in the end, not on our own efforts, but upon the grace and mercy of God. It is this outlook that has shaped the lives of the outstanding disciples of Jesus, one after the other, down through the ages.

The Pharisees are a tragic group in the gospel story. Theirs was a movement of popular piety that aimed to promote a revival of Israel's traditions. Many of them were honourable; and not a few found faith in Christ. This parable, however, highlights the issue that brought some of them into conflict with Jesus. These people thought they were 'at rights with God', and faithful to the God of the covenant, through their strict observance of the externals of the Law's requirements. Luke has already described Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees for preferring external observance to 'justice and the love of God' (11:42), and for a love of money that had no thought for almsgiving (16:14). The Pharisee in the story is pleased with himself, because he does more than the Law requires in his fasting and the tithes he gives. He brings these practices of his to the Lord, as establishing his claim on God's favour. His spirit of self-sufficiency is echoed ironically in the telling of the story – in his prayer, he is speaking 'to himself'.

The only attitude on our part, that opens a genuine meeting with God, is one of humility. We should stand naked before the Lord, aware that there is nothing we can bring to God that is not, in the first place, his gift. All that we bring before him that is truly our own is our sinfulness.

The tax collector, on the other hand, 'went home at rights with God' because of the humble confession that made up his prayer. The generous mercy of God is emphasised by the fact that a repentant tax collector would probably bring before God an impossible situation, as far as recompense was concerned. Despised by his people for being the agent of the occupying power, and constantly tempted to take advantage of his position by defrauding the people, he was bound to make restitution of the amount unjustly taken, plus twenty per cent.

John Thornhill sm