

30th Sunday Year C 2022 Homily

We need just to think of the courage it takes for the tax-collector to go into the Temple. The Temple, as we have said before, was the holiest place on earth for the Jews. It was where God was seen to reside among his people. The place where the ark of the covenant had come to rest. To the shock of many faiths at the time, there was no statue inside. Just the presence of God. But to approach God in his earthly home, you had to be worthy to do so.

What everyone, as we can see from the Pharisee's words today, what everyone knew was that the tax-collector wasn't anywhere near worthy by their standards. It would not only be the Pharisee who would be giving him a wide berth and pointing him out. He was a shameful figure. And yet here he was before God. Taking his courage in his hands, realising and accepting the sins that he had committed (which were probably many and serious because of his work), and placing himself totally at the mercy of God and in fact of his fellow worshippers.

I think we would do well to stop and pause for a moment and reflect on his desire for God. For all his faults, he knows he is being drawn by God to come and stand before him, regardless of what others think about him.

Put ourselves in his situation and picture what it much have been like for him to do this. There is a depth of faith here, trust in God, and love of God, that even in his sinfulness he senses that God loves him enough to allow it.

This story (along with that of Zacchaeus that comes later in the chapter) comes just before Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and his journey towards his passion. Jesus' teaching here is about the effect of what he is about to do. How his death and resurrection are going to enable these sorts of conversions to happen, not just now, but for all time. How after his passion and ascension, which only Luke makes much of, Jesus will be present among us so that when we are drawn to him, to God, as the tax-collector is, and come in the right state of mind and heart, that renewal is here for us all too.

This might sound very distant to us, that picture of an ancient tax-collector in the Temple, but think for a moment of how we begin our Mass. Before we come to the readings we make the sign of the cross, with which we are stating in a very physical way our belief in the Trinity and the love within it and for us. God welcomes us then as we come together through the words of the priest. But what do we do then?

We state openly and together in our temple and before God, and among others, that we are sinners. 'I confess.' And just as the tax-collector did, we beat our breasts as a mark of our need of healing and our recognition of our lack of worthiness, unless God steps in.

It might be that we don't often think about this prayer, that it sails past us at the beginning, but this prayer actually gets us into the right frame of mind and heart to come together with God and each other. Because of our trust in God, and what Jesus has taught us, we do not, should not, need to point the finger at others; were we to do so we would be more like the Pharisee. But we can be sure that God will make us worthy to do so. "Only say the word, and my soul shall be healed."

Just as Jesus tells the disciples, 'That man went home again at rights with God,' that is us, when we faithfully pray that prayer. But not alone, with our brothers and sisters, with each other.