

Fr. Martin's Reflection – October 23, 2022

**“The Lord is a God of justice, who knows no favorites.
Though not unduly partial toward the weak, yet he hears the cry of the oppressed.”**

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

In the Gospel Jesus addresses people who pride themselves on their virtue while despising everyone else. They honor themselves by humiliating others. His listeners are in for a shock when he tells them the parable of two men who go to the Temple to pray. One was a good man, the other a real crook. One led a decent religious life, the other was mixed up in corruption – tax collectors worked for the Roman occupying power and made sure they collected high taxes so that they could get a good cut. The good and the bad go to pray, but only one of them actually prays.

The Pharisee addresses his prayer “to himself”. There is no doubt who is in the lead role and his prayer sounds like the annual report of current assets. He blesses God that he is not like so many others, although he seems unsure about who exactly he is. He compares himself to the tax collector whom he treats as a doormat to walk over. He fasts twice a week and gives ten per cent of his earnings to the poor. That is certainly good. If every Christian did that, the complexity of the world would change! But for all his giving, the Pharisee never gives himself. His real self is secret.

The tax collector stands far off in the shadows. He has no annual accounts to boast of: his percentage is stolen from his own people, including the poor. He tells the simple truth about himself: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” He doesn’t beat about the bush but beats his breast instead. He knows the truth about who he really is, and he throws himself entirely on God’s mercy. He has nothing to offer God but his own wrongdoing and brokenness. They are his. He doesn’t go outside himself but recognizes his truth and hopes that God’s mercy can take care of it. He owns his own sin. His real self is no secret.

What Jesus now says will come as a shock to the Jewish official’s religious system. He declares that the tax collector goes home justified while the Pharisee does not. The tax collector gets much more than he asked for: he prayed for *mercy* but is now *justified*. In the judgment of Jesus everything is turned upside down. The tax collector’s prayer “pierced the clouds.” The Pharisee’s prayer reached its destination: himself.

If we come to pray and realize that our religion has a heavy investment in despising other people, then we will just go home again as we came. “God, be merciful to us, sinners” is the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Anything else is for the mercy of God.

Friends, let us go to our God, knowing that God has nothing but love for us. Let us go acknowledging our frailty and seeking God’s grace and strength.

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