

30th Sunday per Annum - C
Sirach 35:12-14, 16-18;
II Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18;
Luke 18:9-14
Little Flower - 10/27/19

My Brothers and Sisters,

In one of the alternate opening prayers in the former Sacramentary, we prayed, “Lord our God, in you justice and mercy meet.” That meeting of justice and mercy can be seen in the today’s first reading and today’s Gospel.

The first reading from Sirach begins by telling us that *“The Lord is a God of justice.”* Sirach goes on to explain what that means. First, God *“knows no favorites.”* He is not even *“unduly partial toward the weak.”* In other words, God loves all his children equally. Scripture constantly reminds us that God’s ways and our ways are very different. Unlike God, we find it very difficult not to have favorites and not to show favoritism.

At the same time, Sirach makes the point that God *“hears the cry of the oppressed.”* Sirach mentions two of the three groups most likely to be oppressed or victimized in Old Testament times: widows and orphans. Aliens, i.e., immigrants, foreigners, refugees, are the third group mentioned most often in the Old Testament as potential victims of oppression. For example, we read in Exodus: *“You shall not oppress an alien; you well know how it feels to be an alien, since you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt”* [23:9]. As Christians, we too need to hear the cry of the oppressed. Therefore, we need to ask ourselves who are the oppressed today not only in our own country but throughout the world.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus draws a very clear contrast between the Pharisee and the tax collector. It is important to note Jesus’ words: *“The Pharisee took up his position and spoke this prayer to himself, ‘O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity...or even like this tax collector.’”* Although it is a play on words, I believe Jesus was saying that by setting himself apart from and above others, the Pharisee was really not talking to God but to himself! On the other hand, the tax collector *“stood at a distance and would not even raise his eyes to heaven but beat his breast and prayed, ‘O God, be merciful to me a sinner.’”* Unlike the Pharisee, he prayed to God, God heard his prayer, and he was justified.

During the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy a few years ago, Pope Francis more than once made the point that to be merciful, we first need to have experienced God’s mercy. In the Old Testament Book of Leviticus, *“The LORD said to Moses, ‘Speak to the whole Israelite community and tell them: Be holy, for I, the LORD your God, am holy’”* [19:1-2]. This is rendered differently in Matthew’s and Luke’s Gospels. In Matthew, Jesus said, *“So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect”* [5:48]. However, in Luke, Jesus said, *“Be merciful, just as (also) your Father is merciful”* [6:36]. Only if we have experienced God’s mercy in our lives, can we be truly merciful to others and, therefore, become holy as God is holy.

St. Paul exemplifies this in the second reading. Throughout his writings, he acknowledges that he had been the recipient of God’s mercy. Because of this and because the Lord stood by him and gave him strength, he is able to forgive those who deserted him and did not defend him at the first hearing of his trial.

My brothers and sisters, the last thing we want to think as we read today’s Gospel is “O God, I thank you that I am not like that Pharisee.” The first part of today’s second reading is often read at funerals. When all is said and done, we want to be able to humbly say with Paul, *“I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith.”*