

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Oct 27th 2013

PRE-PRAYERING

“How we look” or “seem” is a natural question we can ask of ourselves. Appearances have some importance. The usual pattern is that we do not appreciate our physical outwardness so much and we dress it up to cover up. Others usually do not notice what we dislike and meet us beyond our shame.

Praying is allowing God to meet us in our simplicity, beyond our coverings. This week as we walk our ways and pray our days, we might hold up to God those shame-places and even pray with the cover-ups with which we think we dazzle others. We are, through God’s grace, preparing to be our truest selves as we assist at the Eucharistic liturgy. He comes in Word and Sacrament to where and to whom we are really ourselves to unshame us from being dominated by our humanity as we prepare to share in his divinity. In a sense, the Eucharist transforms us from seeming to being.

REFLECTION

The books within the Hebrew Scriptures known as “Wisdom Literature” often personify aspects of the mysterious God. In the First Reading from Sirach, God is pictured as having ears and does not play favorites. God does, however, tend to listen attentively to the poor, the orphaned, the widow and all who are lowly and oppressed. These prayers have quite a direct line up to heaven and into God’s ears.

One other group whose petitions are heard are those who willingly serve God. God seems to be quite like us. We are good to those who are good to us, who attend to our needs. As with the readings from last weekend’s liturgy, prayer can seem to be centered around getting what we want while giving the impression that everything God gives us is a gift. This reading is poetically simple and charming, but does form God into our image and likeness a bit too much.

The Gospel does help clarify things. Here again, it is important to notice to whom the parable is offered. The Pharisees, of course, are the usual suspects and all others who are convinced of their own righteousness and spend much time affirming themselves by judging and reducing others with false, but self-flattering comparisons.

The first person in the parable happens to be a Pharisee and he gets up close and personal with God

and prays to “himself”! This is the very word Jesus uses to express how self-centered and self-righteous is this person who is pretending to pray. He spends quite a bit of time being grateful that he is not like the rest of humanity who are greedy, dishonest and adulterous, and he is thankful that he is not like this tax collector standing in the back of the temple. He then recites and recalls how he does the rituals of fasting and tithing. He has all the tickets in his hands. He is all dressed up in a pretense of piety.

One of Luke’s little literary devices is reversal or contrasting in a surprising way. Things are upside down and the usual becomes unusual. Jesus’ ways are contrary to our human patterns. We have then a tax collector who stands at a safe distance from God and is dressed only in his suit of sinfulness, but he knows it! He prays, not to himself, but to God and with words reflecting his naked truth.

Earlier in Luke’s narrative, Peter, the first to be called, came close to Jesus and asked Jesus to depart, because he, Peter, was a sinful man. Jesus didn’t deny that truth, but didn’t deny either Jesus’ call to follow him in his sinful suit. Here, in this parable, the theme stays firm. Jesus does send the tax collector out of the temple while the Pharisee seems to stay there preening himself.

Jesus is catching the attention of both the self-righteous and the self-condemning. Jesus is blessing the truth, but obviously not the sin. He is challenging the former concepts of legalistically-based holiness. Jesus is consoling those who know their truth of fallenness and faithfulness at the same time. It can be assumed that both men will be back in their same positions; one patting himself on the back, the other kicking himself a little bit lower. Being forgiven and sent forth does not mean perfection. It does seem that the Christ-right person will return begging for and again receiving healing and mission. It does take the grace of humility for us to be missioned by the sacrament of Reconciliation knowing full well that we will be coming back for more and new healing graces for our recovering from the old fractures. Jesus is never ashamed of us, bored with us, fed-up with us. Jesus doesn’t change in what we call time. God’s love is ever-lasting, ever anciently new and always transforming seeming to being!

“We will ring out our joy at your saving help and exult in the name of our God.”

Larry Gillick, S.J.