

There are two priests from my home diocese in India are working in Austria. They told me about this church in Vienna where the former ruling family in Austria, the Hapsburgs, family members are buried.

There was a very interesting custom connected with the royal funeral. When royal funeral arrived, the mourners knocked at the closed church door to be allowed in. A priest inside would ask 'Who is it that desires admission here?' They would call out, 'His apostolic majesty, the emperor'. The priest would answer, 'I don't know him'. They would knock a second time, and again the priest would ask who is there. The Royal family members outside the church door would announce, 'The Royal family member'. A second time the priest would say, 'I don't know him'. A third time they would knock on the door and the priest would ask 'Who is it?' The third time the answer would be, 'A poor sinner, your brother or sister.' Then the church door would be opened.

This interesting custom tells us that in front of God all are sinners, all are equals. There is no distinction between king or subject, rich or poor, or black or white. All are sinners. All are brothers and sisters. That is the only way to get inside the church and also to get inside the heavenly door.

The main theme of today's Gospel is that true humility and repentance for our sins must be the hallmark of our prayers

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The first reading, from Sirach, is a perfect companion piece to the Gospel parable. In one striking image from Sirach, the writer declares "*the prayer of the lowly, pierces the clouds to reach the unseen throne of God.*" Such prayers are heard because they come from the hearts of people who know how much they need God. Although God has no favorites and answers the prayers of all, the oppressed, the orphans, the widows, and those who can least help themselves are His special concern. That is why the best prayer is humble and selfless service to such marginalized and abandoned people

In today's Second Reading from the Second Letter of Paul to Timothy, we find examples of Paul's, humility. Like the tax collector in the Gospel parable, St. Paul, a former pharisee, humbly acknowledges, his work as accomplished by the grace of God, and he thanks God for enabling him to fight a good battle — to run a good race while keeping his Faith intact and proclaiming it

The Gospel continues with the theme of humility by telling us the parable of pharisee and tax collector. Both go to the Temple to pray. Which means they were good people. Bad people do not pray.

However, there is big difference between how both prayed to God.

The Pharisee, instead of presenting himself humbly before God asking for God's help and grace, lists the faults of others, and complains also about the tax collector praying nearby. The Pharisee comes to the Temple, not to cry out for help, but to remind God of his goodness. Setting himself apart, the Pharisee points out his very many merits and goodness- he fasts, he pays tithes. He reminds God that he is not like so many others who are grasping and crooked and adulterous. He is so full of himself that he doesn't recognize his own emptiness. He does not have enough sense to ask God to help him be a better person. He thinks he has everything. He was fact demanding his reward for his good deeds! He leaves the Temple with nothing.

His prayer is like, going to visit a doctor and instead of telling your sickness, you tell the sickness of others. How could a doctor treat you in such situation?

On the other hand, the tax collector goes to the temple in repentance. Even his body language displays his repentance: he stood away at a distance, did not raise his eyes and he beat his breast. But it is above all in his prayer that we see his repentance, "O God, be merciful to me a sinner." (Luke 18:13) Unlike the Pharisee, he did not try to conceal who he really was or put on a mask to hide his real self from God. He came to God as he was. Therefore, God met him where he was and lifted him up and went home justified.

In today's Gospel parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector, Jesus reminds us that God hears the prayers those who approach Him in humility with a repentant heart. God did not hear the prayer of this Pharisee because he exalted himself. His prayer was a prayer of pride that he was not as evil as other people. He announced to God his freedom from sin and detailed his fidelity in observing the prescribed fast and in giving tithes. The tax collector's prayer, "*O God, be merciful to me, a sinner,*" was heard because he humbled himself, acknowledging his sins and requesting God's mercy.

There is some form Pharisee-ism in each of us. Just like the Pharisees, we all have some pride, arrogance, self-centeredness, egoism and hypocrisy to a greater or lesser degree. Readings of this Sunday are calling us to make that journey from pride to humility, just as the Royal family of Austria did.