

## SUNDAY OF THE PUBLICAN AND THE PHARISEE - St Luke 18:10-14

Today, as we open the Service Book called the Lenten Triodion, which will take us to Saturday before Easter, we are invited to enter the pre-Lenten period through the gate of the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee. The parable stands at the door of the Fast because it invites us to recognise the truth of our existence in spiritual terms and we cannot make any progress in Lent unless we see its message as a necessary starting point. It reminds us that we are failures before God but also that if we really understand this in our hearts we can in fact become great or be exalted by God not in any selfish or vainglorious way but in terms of serving God. Some years ago I remember Bishop Anthony talking about a priest he knew as a young man, who was a very gifted and human person but a habitual drunkard. He took a shine to our bishop and counselled him to go on with his ascetic struggle but confessed there was nothing he could do for himself as the problem was too deep, too ingrained and caused by a number of terrible tragedies which had befallen him in his life like the loss of his wife and children in the revolution. Naturally, his drunkenness was known quite widely and the pious members of the parish predictably gave him a wide berth and did not associate with him. It struck me when I heard this account that in a strange way this priest was very blessed in a real sense. He knew his own sin in a very personal and tragic way and experienced great public shame. As a result, he saw life clearly, as it was, and people too, rather like prostitutes do. Hence Christ attracted them and found them easy to talk to. But in a sense this priest was receiving his judgement here on earth now and furthermore was entering into Christ's sufferings in a unique way.

Now this experience of shame at our own sins and the recognition of who we are is at the basis of any meaningful relationship with God. In the parable it is called humility and the Fathers say it is one of the greatest gifts to be able to see ourselves as we are. And if we have this spiritual insight of seeing ourselves as we shall appear before Christ one day, we cannot fail to walk humbly before God, to see all worldly honour as empty and worthless and to cry out unceasingly, "God be merciful to me, a sinner", as the Orthodox Church bids us do through the repetition of the Jesus Prayer. And if we reach this point, we will understand in our shame our need for repentance and forgiveness. Then too, we will understand that all things are truly given by God and that our only role can be to serve him in our weakness and not despair of his love. And because we see the picture truly God can use us.

There is a wonderful passage in the book of Joshua, which is read at the Vespers of Theophany which describes how the Lord says to Joshua that this day he will begin to exalt him in the sight of Israel as he did Moses. Now we know that Joshua had served God, Moses and the people of Israel faithfully and that Moses had told God on a number of occasions that he really did not want the job of leading this difficult people. So as Christ says humility and exaltation go together in a paradoxical but understandable way because the person is transparent wanting only the good of God and his people. This is neatly summed up in the words of Christ which we are urged to pray, "Thy Kingdom come". I do not know if you are familiar with the Japanese people and their culture. Overtly, they look as if they have been produced in a factory because they are so alike. Individually, they can be extremely radical and reveal extraordinary talents, such as when they remove their office suits and begin to sing kara oke. But everything in their tradition, culture and code of honour is based on serving the society and the nation while suppressing their own desires. "The nail that sticks up will be hammered down" is one of the more striking sayings which stresses society's good over egotism. And in the insect kingdom we observe ants, to which the Japanese



people are often compared, expending all their energy, even sacrificing themselves for the survival of the colony.

In a similar vein John the Baptist reminds the Pharisees that their spiritual pedigree is worthless as is their boast of their proximity to God. "Do not presume to say 'we have God as our Father. I tell you God is able to raise up these stones to Abraham.'" There is nothing in ourselves that we can justifiably take pride in. All that we have is of God and if we recognise this we can find peace with ourselves and what befalls us and in our own small way contribute to the salvific work of God on earth.

As we pass through these weeks of preparation for the Great Fast of Lent and as we begin expectantly and no doubt somewhat apprehensively our worship in this new place, let us acknowledge our unworthiness in the prayer of the Publican and ask for the gift of faithfulness to our vocation in the Church which, by God's grace, will hasten the coming of the Kingdom.

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