



ACTA  
LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Year C  
Year of Luke

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READINGS

*A reading from the book of Ecclesiasticus* 35:12-14. 16-19

*Responsorial Psalm* Psalm 33:2-3. 17-19. 23. R/. v. 7

*A reading from the second letter of St Paul to Timothy*

4:6-8. 16-18

*A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke* 18:9-14

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Last week Jesus spoke a parable to his disciples “to the effect that they ought always to pray and not to lose heart”. Today

we are presented with another parable, this time told “to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt”. In Luke’s Gospel these two parables follow one upon the other. Both concern praying and both what must fill our hearts when we turn to prayer. In the first parable we are advised that we “ought always to pray and not to lose heart”. In the second we are cautioned that those who pride themselves “on being righteous and treat others with contempt” are unlikely to get a hearing in the courts of heaven.

What is at stake is not what we say but what and where we are in ourselves when we come to pray. The first advice Jesus offered to his disciples was that “they ought always to pray” and that in itself is a challenge to all who believe in the business of praying.

### ***A Reminder***

The journey with Jesus in St Luke’s Gospel is, as we have seen, a walk with a man who prays. This Gospel opens with “a whole multitude of people” praying in the house of God in Jerusalem. When the old priest of the Temple fell to his knees when an angel of the LORD appeared, that angel told him “your prayer had been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son” (Luke 1:12-13). After that there is a cascade of prayers. Mary offers her *Magnificat*; Zechariah prays his *Benedictus*. A multitude of angels burst into a *Gloria*. An old man named Simeon blesses God with his *Nunc Demittis* prayer. And there is a widow-woman named Anna who never left God’s Presence in the Temple but “worshipped with fasting and prayer night and day”.

Inevitably, when the child from Nazareth grew to man’s estate, and gathered people around him, he soon found his way “to the mountain to pray” (Luke 6:12). To be his disciple one had

to take on an unheard of burden, for concerning enemies Jesus demanded,

*Pray for those who abuse you.*

Luke 6:28

That has a resonance in today's Church that fills our hearts with pain beyond measure.

Jesus was praying when one of his disciples asked him,

*Lord, teach us to pray.*

Luke 11:1

The version of the Lord's Prayer that we receive in Luke's Gospel has not become an everyday prayer as has the version in St Matthew's Gospel. But the commentary that Jesus offers on Luke's version comes with a counsel that supports all our praying,

*And I tell you,  
Ask,  
and it will be given to you;  
Seek,  
and you will find;  
Knock,  
and it will be opened to you.*

A father will not give a serpent when a child asks for a fish. A father will not give a scorpion, when his child asks for an egg. What God gives to those who pray is beyond what we pray for. For every prayer we utter is answered by the heavenly Father in a profusion of the Holy Spirit. Whenever we pray, no matter how broken our hearts, God's Spirit fills our hearts and empowers us to bear the heat of the day.

By the time we get to the two parables concerning prayer in chapter 18, we have been well instructed in the art of praying by word and example. But there is more to learn. To grasp the teaching embedded in these two stories we will be the better able to unravel difficulties they contain if we turn to the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach or the Book of Ecclesiasticus (as Catholic Bibles usually call it).

### **Apocrypha or the Deuterocanonical Books**

The Wisdom of Jesus, ben-Sirach is to be found only in the Bibles of the Catholic Church and of the Orthodox Churches. These books grouped together are called Apocrypha, a Greek word. But it is an odd word. Basically, it means “things that are hidden”. Some ancients believed that the name was given to these books because they should be hidden from the unlearned and available only to those of superior insight. Others claimed that they should be hidden because they were the work of heretics.

One thing these books have in common is that they were written or preserved in Greek and not in Hebrew. For this reason they are not included in the Hebrew Bible. They are, however, included in the ancient Greek translation of that Bible called the Septuagint. This is a translation begun about 250 years before the birth of Jesus by Jewish scribes serving the large and prosperous Jewish community in Alexandria in Egypt. This Greek Bible became the Bible of the first Christians and every quotation and reference to the Hebrew Bible in the 27 books of the New Testament is from the Septuagint Greek translation. There are a few Hebrew or Aramaic words preserved in our New Testament and these are generally translated by those who wrote our Gospels.

Not all Apocrypha are included in Catholic or Orthodox Bibles. Of 15 books usually identified as Apocrypha, only these are included in Catholic Bibles:

Tobit  
Judith,  
The Wisdom of Solomon  
The Wisdom of Jesus, son of Sirach (Ecclesiasticus)  
I Maccabees  
II Maccabees.

However, many English Bibles that follow the Jewish and Protestant traditions include these books as worthy of study. It is only right to record that Anglican liturgy makes some use of these works and all biblical scholars study them assiduously.

In Catholic circles these books are often called Deuterocanonical Books, meaning that they are somehow of secondary importance (*deutero-* means “of second rank”) when compared to the Hebrew Bible.

### **The Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach**

This work, written in Egypt by a Jew named Sirach and translated into Greek by his grandson (“ben”) called Jesus, is a long treatise on wisdom. Since all wisdom comes from God, for God created wisdom, to be wise is to follow all that God ordained for humanity’s guidance. It is in this book that we read an often-misunderstood declaration:

*To fear God is the beginning of wisdom.*

Sirach 1:14

To help with the puzzling words in today’s Gospel, the beautiful words of the Wisdom of ben Sirach will come to our

aid. For today's first reading looks at prayer from the point of view of the LORD, the Most High God.

**A reading from the book of Ecclesiasticus 35:12-14. 16-19**

*The LORD is the judge,  
and with him is no partiality.  
He will not show partiality in the case of a poor man;  
and he will listen to the prayer of one who is wronged.  
He will not ignore the supplication of the orphan  
or the widow when she pours out her story.  
He whose service is pleasing to the LORD  
will be accepted,  
and his prayer will reach to the clouds.  
The prayer of the humble pierces the clouds,  
and he will not be consoled until it reaches the Lord;  
he will not desist until the Most High visits him  
and does justice for the righteous and executes judgment.  
And the LORD will not delay,  
neither will he be dilatory on their behalf.*

The word of the LORD

Meditate on this reading in the light of the parable of last week and that of today. Notice that the sentiments of each parable resonate with the sentiments expressed so wisely in the words of ben Sirach. What is at stake is the identity of the God to whom we make our prayers.

First, God is just: *with him there is no partiality (34:15)*. God does not do favourites. Rather, God listens to the prayer of anyone who is wronged.

Secondly,

*... God judges the case of his people*

*and makes them rejoice in his mercy.*

Sirach 35:25).

God is a God who tempers justice with mercy. The orphan and the widow are helpless and therefore the LORD makes haste to help them.

So we have justice and we have mercy. To ensure that when we speak of God acting justly and tempering justice with mercy we must recall who God is and what God does.

God ***is*** love. God is steadfast love, the only love that endures forever. It is this God who ***does*** justice, who acts justly. But God acts, not according to human justice. God is not an Old Bailey judge, weighting up the pros and cons of evidence. God acts justly in accord with his nature, that is, according to divine everlasting love. God has to be just to God, to act in accord with God's nature.

God is love and this love determines that God ***does*** justice and God ***does*** mercy. God's love determines that his response to human affairs is shot through with justice and his justice is shot through with mercy. The next line to the long quotation from ben Sirach is this:

*Have mercy on us, O LORD.*

Yet the complaint of Job is still a genuine accusation:

*From out of the city the dying groan,  
and the soul of the wounded cries for help;  
yet God charges no one with wrong . . . .  
The murderer rises before it is light,  
that he may kill the poor and needy,  
and in the night he is like a thief.*

Job 24:12-13

It is not easy to understand, or even to express, the mystery of God. The danger is that when we write God into our sentences and paragraphs we may begin to think that we have captured the nature of God. But in the poetry of today's Responsorial Psalm, we are offered a vision of a God who rights wrongs, a God who is near to the broken-hearted:

*The face of the LORD is against those who do evil,  
to cut off the memory of them from the earth.  
When the righteous cry for help,  
the LORD hears  
and delivers them out of all their trouble.*

But still all around us “*the hungry sheep look up and are not fed*”.

St Paul reminds us of our humanity, our human limitations:

*For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.*

I Corinthians 13:12

That is why St Luke adds on a sentence of Jesus that surely was not originally attached to today's parable:

*Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?*

Luke 18:8

Jesus refers to his return to bring to fulfilment the human project, finally to wrap all creation in the warmth of God's love. His concerns are with the realities of human behaviour. Though the love and mercy of God watch over the comings and goings of the human family, will the people on this planet ever learn and believe that God loves them and will judge them with love and mercy? Our judgement of God's love and mercy



demands that we acknowledge our responsibility. How does God's love empower us to love? The last word may be left to the grandson of Sirach:

*Hear, O LORD, the prayer of your servants,  
according to your good will for your people,  
and all who are on earth will know  
that you are the LORD,  
the God of the ages.*

Wisdom of ben Sirach 36:22

Our prayer must be transformative; it must turn us from mere listeners to doers of the word.

### **Responsorial Psalm**

Psalm 34:2-3. 17-19. 23. R/. v. 7

*R/. This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him  
and saved him out of all his troubles.*

*I will bless the LORD at all times;  
his praise shall continually be in my mouth.  
My soul makes its boast in the Lord;  
let the humble hear and be glad. R/.*

*The face of the LORD is against those who do evil,  
to cut off the memory of them from the earth.  
When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears  
and delivers them out of all their troubles. R/.*

*The LORD is near to the broken-hearted  
and saves the crushed in spirit.*

*The LORD redeems the life of his servants;  
none of those who take refuge in him  
will be condemned.*

*R/. This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him  
and saved him out of all his troubles.*

Many psalms have a superscription, that is, an introductory piece of information (usually written in small capital letters) that identifies the author or indicates the tune to which the psalm is to be sung, or provides some information that helps to make sense of the prayer being offered. In the case of Psalm 34 there is a relatively long piece of information:

OF DAVID,  
WHEN HE ALTERED HIS GOOD SENSE BEFORE ABIMELECH,  
WHO BANISHED HIM, AND HE WENT AWAY.

What the superscription refers to is recorded in I Samuel 21:14. David in flight from King Saul is surrounded outside the Philistine city of Gath by King Achish of the Philistines. David pretends to be mad (ALTERED HIS GOOD SENSE) and so convincing is the performance that he is allowed to go on his way unharmed.

The psalm celebrates the God who delivered David from his enemies and the prayer is fitting therefore to be prayed by anyone who is in danger and whose cries to the LORD are answered. However, we may well ask whether cries to the LORD are always and urgently heard, and whether, as the very next psalm declares, there will, in the midst of human misery, be cause to sing a new song:

*Then my soul will rejoice in the LORD,  
exulting in his salvation.*

*All my bones shall say,  
 “O LORD, who is like you,  
 delivering the poor  
 from him who is too strong for him,  
 the poor and needy from him who robs him?”*

Psalm 35:9-10

### **A reading from the second letter of St Paul to Timothy**

4:6-8. 16-18

*I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.*

*At my first defence no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them! But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen*

The word of the LORD.

The author of this second letter to Timothy who is pretending to be St Paul writing from prison in Rome is careful. When St Paul's wrote his letter to Philippian Christians, the great apostle was in confinement in Rome. But he was optimistic and expecting to be released so that he hoped to be able to visit Philippi at some near future date. He wrote:

*Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.*

Philippians 2:17

There is less optimism in the opening line of today's lesson:

*For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.*

Paul is imagined to be at death's door and that is meant to add to the urgency and deathbed solemnity to his words.

*I am [already] being poured out as a drink offering* is just one word in the Greek original of this letter (*spendomai*) and in Philippians. It occurs nowhere else in the New Testament. The meaning is to be found in the Book of Numbers where it is recorded that water is thrown on a lamb as it is about to be burned in sacrifice (Numbers 28:24). Paul now sees the end is near and his life is finally about to be poured out. But I think that he sees his life as being joined to the sacrifice of Jesus, the Passover Lamb sacrificed on our behalf. Paul himself had written,

*For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.*

I Corinthians 5:7

Like Jesus, Paul can claim (according to the anonymous author writing in his name) that, like a dedicated athlete, he has fought to good fight; he has been faithful in his ministry as apostle of the gospel of God and that he will be crowned as one of the Lord's righteous people, welcomed into glory by that same Lord Jesus who will come to all who patiently await his coming.

At this point the Lectionary skips seven verses of the text of the letter and jumps forward to Paul's appearance in court, pleading his innocence. The Greek word for "defence" is *apologia*, that is, his claim to be "not guilty" and giving an explanation that proves his case. What he does is to proclaim before the pagans who were trying him the message of the gospel. His *apologia*, his defence, won the day because the Lord stood by him. The Lord empowered his every word. Do not miss this line:

*The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed.*

The verb used for "rescue" here is *sōsō*, meaning "to save". If we translate the sentence thus:

*The Lord will save me from every evil,*

You will see how close the sentence is to the Lord's Prayer:

*Deliver us from evil.*

It is, perhaps, a tiny piece of evidence that the Lord's Prayer (in Matthew's version?) was widely known. The phrase at the end of the paragraph,

*bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom,*

is also reminiscent of Matthew's Gospel. St Matthew uses the phrase *kingdom of heaven* 32 times, referring to the will of God being done of earth. Here the *heavenly* kingdom is a reference to the eternal dwelling. The writer (s) of these anonymous letters echo the language we meet in the authentic letters of St Paul and of the Gospels.

## **A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke 18:9-14**

*[Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get’.*

*But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.*

The Gospel of the LORD.

Again St Luke begins the parable with an interpretation. The parable is meant for the ears of those “who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and who treated others with contempt”. But Luke’s readers and hearers will not have understood that those who considered themselves to be righteous were self-righteous prigs as we might be inclined to think. The people to whom Jesus directed his parable considered themselves to be in God’s good favour. They have an arrogant self-confidence that all that they are and all that they do demands that God be on their side and join them in despising all others.

Those in most need of hearing this parable are those who exclusively claim the favour of God to be theirs. It is not simply a claim that they possess God’s favour. It is that God vindicates their claim and confirms that they are right to hold all others in contempt. They claim to share in God’s righteous, to enjoy such favour with God that they mirror God’s image.

The Pharisee will make his way up to the Temple as if he owned the place.

The parable will assess the two men, the Pharisee and the tax collector. They set out to pray to God. What does their prayer reveal about them and what does their praying reveal about God?

### **A Pharisee and a tax collector**

In the four the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles, Pharisees are mentioned 98 times. In the writings of St Luke, his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, Pharisees are mentioned 36 times. For the most part, Pharisees emerge from these Christian writings with a very sullied reputation, a reputation that convinces the Oxford English Dictionary to define a Pharisee in less than praiseworthy terms:

One of an ancient Jewish sect distinguished by their strict observance of the traditional and written law, and by their pretensions to superior sanctity.

Not much of this accords with the historical facts. First, Christians who read their Gospels carefully will notice that the Pharisees play little or no part at all in the death of Jesus. They are mentioned in John 18:3 but that is the only time they are mentioned in the events surrounding the trial and crucifixion of Jesus.

The Pharisees emerge from the time of the Maccabean successful revolt (166-159 B.C.) to throw off foreign occupation. The name “Pharisee” comes from a Hebrew word meaning “to separate”. Pharisees were pious people who separated themselves from all that was unclean according to their interpretation of the laws to be found in the Book of Leviticus and in traditional custom. They were opposed to any

compromise with foreign and pagan life styles. They sought to encourage a renewal of true and undiluted faith, the faith of their fathers and mothers, as they understood that faith to be.

They were, therefore, upholders of the Torah and sought to influence the people in the growth of local synagogues that began in the period of the Maccabean success. The movement produced great rabbis, such as Hillel and Shammai, and they were sufficiently liberal to tolerate the very divergent religious understanding taught by those scholars.

After the Jewish revolt of 66 A.D. failed and the Temple was destroyed, it was the Pharisees whose piety did not depend on priests who survived and created Judaism as it exists today. It was in the turmoil of discontent, revolt, defeat, and restructuring that beset Judaism during and immediately after the defeat by Roman legions, that a viable religious faith emerged. However Christian faith was born and was spreading as Judaism was trying to save itself. Conflict between the two was inevitable.

The fact is that our Gospels present an antagonistic view of the Pharisees. What Pharisees wanted to do was to protect Israel's faith from contamination by the world of paganism. What Christians sought to do was to convert the world paganism to their understanding of Judaism as interpreted by the Jew, Jesus of Nazareth.

St Paul was a Pharisee. He lived and died a Pharisee. But most Pharisees in those turbulent times could not tolerate such a radical reordering of traditional values and beliefs as Jesus of Nazareth proposed. Nor could they be expected to look kindly on the admission of hosts of pagans into a movement that claimed to be a fulfilment of Jewish Scriptures. These Gentiles, the *goyim*, were, after all, not only appropriating Jewish holy books. They were claiming that they alone truly understood



the meaning of all that God was saying in these writings that were inspired by the God of Israel.

When Christians began to write their own understanding of Judaism and about their allegiance to Jesus of Nazareth (in the eyes of most Jews at the time, a criminal rightfully put to death), enough was enough. Pharisees became the enemy of the sect of Christians and Christians became the despisers of the Pharisees. This is, sadly, all too clear in the pages of our Gospels.

So it is not at all surprising that the piety of a Pharisee is shown up by contrast with the prayer of a tax collector. A tax collector was a traitor to faith and the community of Jewish people. Their greed served to enrich the Roman Empire whose crushing taxation system impoverished the people. God's holy people suffered unbearable burdens imposed by the rapacity of foreigners and Jewish tax collectors sold the wealth of God's little acre to the fat cats living it up in pagan Rome. What tax collectors did was to throw pearls before swine. What was God to make of such sacrilegious behaviour?

## **God**

As usual in all the parables we find in our Gospels, the image of God is not far from front stage. If not on stage, God is always in the wings prompting or in the director's box directing. Remember that in today's parable the two men are going up to the Temple, to God's House, to the Tabernacle of God's Presence. They are going up to address in prayer the God they both recognise as their God.

First, we meet the Pharisee. He "stood his ground". The shape of the Greek verb (*statheis*) has the force of taking up a position against or opposed to the stance of another. For example, in the story of the tax collector Zacchaeus (the star of next Sunday's Gospel), he stands up against the begrudging crowd who do not approve of Jesus sitting down to eat with the

little man. The verb there is the same *statheis* (Luke 19:8) as in today's parable. As soon as Pharisee is in the door of the Temple, he is standing up against all comers to assert his piety. He is holy and proud of it.

His prayer to God is not so much a prayer as a glowing reference written by himself. He is, he tells God, not like other people (the Greek here should be translated "people" rather than "men"). In the list of people he is not like, the Pharisee names the tax collector in last place. In a Greek sentence, last in a list is the place of particular emphasis. For example, in listing the Twelve, Judas is always named last. So here. The worst sin is to be devoted to the business of collecting taxes for the hated Romans. And the Pharisee would never dream of doing such a thing.

Instead he sets out a display of his virtues. He fasts and pays tithes. Fasting is enjoined on all Jews on the Day of Atonement:

*And it shall be a statute to you forever that in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict yourselves and shall do no work, either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you. For on this day shall atonement be made for you to cleanse you. You shall be clean before the Lord from all your sins. It is a Sabbath of solemn rest to you, and you shall afflict yourselves; it is a statute forever.*  
Leviticus 19:29-31

Fasting is commended in the Book of Esther 9:31 and Zechariah 8:19 insists on regular fasting. By the end of the first century, around the time Luke wrote his Gospel, many Jews fasted on two days of the week as did Christians but on different days. So our Pharisee's fasting twice a week is typical of Pharisee piety.

The same with paying tithes. The practice of tithing was a feature of Judaism at the time of Jesus and Pharisees honoured

the practice. Luke exaggerates the extent of tithing in 11:37-44 but it was a feature of charitable taxation that was encouraged among Pharisees. But taking pride in doing charitable works, as this Pharisee does in the parable, is a bit like having your name on a seat in church.

The most despicable aspect of the Pharisee's prayer is his condemnation of "this tax collector". That is where we see his true colours. His pride before God is actually what separates him from fellow human beings. He glories in his "not like this tax collector". Godliness is the every thing that brings humanity together, that unites us in care and concern. It is not a competitive game; it is a service of love.

In contrast to the self-righteous prig, the tax collector is "standing afar off", just inside what was called "the court of Israel", the Temple area reserved for men. We would say that he stood at the very back of the church. His whole attitude is expressed in terms that recall ancient and profound prayerful demeanour:

*O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens.*      Ezra 9:6

Mention may be made here of a non-biblical text that survives in the ancient language of Ethiopia, fragments of which were found in the caves of Qumran, among what has come to be called The Dead Sea Scrolls. The document is called the *Ethiopic Apocalypse of Enoch*. This is one of three texts attributed to Enoch, an imaginary early descendant of Adam and Eve, who, according to the Book of Genesis "walked with God" (Gen 5:24). The text is usually dated about one to two hundred years before the birth of Jesus. It is important because the influence of this text can be traced in Matthew, Luke, John, Acts, Romans, I and II Corinthians, Colossians, Ephesians, I

and II Thessalonians, I Timothy, Hebrews, I John, Jude, and Revelations. One commentator points out that I Enoch “was influential in moulding New Testament doctrines concerning the nature of the Messiah, the Son of Man, the messianic kingdom, demonology, the future, resurrection, final judgment, and eschatology”. The book was frequently quoted by many of the very earliest of Christian writers.<sup>1</sup> In the book, Enoch writes a prayer for some people who had been teaching injustice,

*... for, as for themselves, from henceforth they will not be able to speak, nor will they raise their eyes unto heaven as a result of their sins*  
 ... I Enoch 13:5

The same humble attitude and posture is to be found in a beautiful text from the prophet Joel:

*“Yet even now,” declares the LORD,  
 “return to me with all your heart,  
 with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;  
 and rend your hearts and not your garments.”  
 Return to the LORD your God,  
 for he is gracious and merciful,  
 slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.*  
 Joel 2:12-13

Notice, too, the attitude of the crowds, and especially the women, who witnessed the death of Jesus:

*And all the crowds that had assembled for this spectacle, when they saw what had taken place, returned home **beating their breasts**. And*

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<sup>1</sup> E. Isaac “Ethiopic Apocalypse of Enoch: A New Translation and Introduction”, in James H. Charlesworth (ed), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Apocalyptic Literature & Testaments*, London: Doubleday, 1983, p.10.

*all his acquaintances and the women who had followed him from Galilee **stood at a distance** watching these things.*

Luke 23:48-49

The words of the tax collector, *Be merciful to me!* reflect the familiar words of a great and familiar prayer:

*Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy  
blot out my transgressions.  
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
and cleanse me from my sin!  
For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is ever before me.  
Against you, you only, have I sinned  
and done what is evil in your sight.*

Psalm 51:1-4

It is somewhat surprising to note that the verb (in Greek) used in the tax collector's prayer, *Be merciful!* [*hilaskomai*] occurs only twice in the New Testament. It is, however, a coincidence fit for a lengthy meditation, to note the context in which the verb turns up again:

*Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation [*hilaskomai*] for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.*

Hebrews 2:17-18<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The verb used is not that which occurs in the frequent and familiar *Kyrie, eleison*. It is *hilaskomai*. Its very rarity adds to the solemnity of the tax man's prayer.

The taxman identifies himself simply as a sinner, praying in the spirit of Psalm 51. There are no frills, no qualifications, no excuses added to the direct admission of where the man stands before God: a sinner who needs mercy.

### **The judgement of Jesus**

The parable ends and, as often in Luke's Gospel, Jesus himself draws the lesson and confirms the only possible conclusion. His brief reference to the Pharisee in the parable speaks volumes. Literally translated it is "rather than other one". The Pharisee is reduced simply to "the other fella". It is the tax collector who has been welcomed into God's embrace.

As for the taxman, Jesus tells us he went down home to his house justified. The word "justified" is rooted in a very profound understanding that is everywhere expressed in the Bible. The word is often translated as "righteous", and, as such, it refers to God. God is righteous for God is Love and the God who is love does justice, does what is right, what is in accordance with that steadfast love that endures forever.

### **At rights with God**

The words "right", "righteous", "righteousness" occur over 900 times in the Bible. The words "just", "justice", "justly", "justify", and "justification" occur over 850 times. While not all apply to God, the vast majority are related to the action of God as the One who acts justly, the one whose justice is an arm of God's love, and the one who demands that humanity act justly after the pattern of God's justice. Notice why God called Abraham to be the foundation stone of a new people:

*For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice.* Genesis 18:19

Notice that in the long commentary that God provides by way of explaining the Ten Commandments, the people gathered around Moses are reminded that,

*You shall not fall in with the many to do evil, nor shall you bear witness in a lawsuit, siding with the many, so as to pervert justice.* Exodus 23:2

When King Solomon made his decision about the baby and the two women each of whom claimed to be the mother,

*... all Israel heard of the judgment that the king had rendered, and they stood in awe of the king, because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him to do justice.*

I Kings 3:28

St Matthew's Gospel is much given to quoting the Hebrew Scriptures to confirm who Jesus is. Even when enemies conspire against Jesus, Matthew underlines his true identity:

*Behold, my servant whom I have chosen,  
my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased.  
I will put my Spirit upon him,  
and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.  
He will not quarrel or cry aloud,  
nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets;  
a bruised reed he will not break,  
and a smouldering wick he will not quench,  
until he brings justice to victory;*

*and in his name the Gentiles will hope.*

Matthew 23:18-21, quoting Isaiah 42:1-2

St Paul emphasises that the whole earthly mission of Jesus, is to put humanity at rights with God. The whole of humanity is called by God “to be conformed to the image of his Son”:

*For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.*

Romans 8:29-30

Paul means that sin has warped humanity and injustices of every kind distort the face of God’s world. Jesus is sent to the world in order to display how human beings must live if they are to be truly human. The dignity of humanity is flawed by the injustices and only by living as Jesus lived will that dignity be restored to its glory. Only God, says St Paul, can do this because God always acts justly in relation to humanity, a justice that flows from the very heart of God. That heart of love embraces the tax collector. His prayer has restored his dignity as a human being and he can go home in peace.

The lesson is there for all: he who thinks himself to stand should beware lest he falls.

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