

### **Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

A supermarket and its car park can be a wonderful place to observe people. But it can also be a place where we can too readily judge others. On Friday as I walked past a car that had just been parked, I couldn't help but hear the foul language that a young father used towards his little daughter as she opened the car door before he was ready for her to do so. I felt sorry for that young child and wondered what kind of love she received at home.

When I am waiting at the checkout I have to stop myself from looking too closely at the shopping trolleys that are being unloaded ahead of me lest I start counting the number of packets of sweets or cartons of soft drinks that might be there or notice the fruit and vegetables that seem to be missing.

It is very easy for us to make judgements about the men we meet in today's gospel. They were not at the supermarket but at the temple. When we listen in to the prayer of the Pharisee, we cannot help but think of him as a very good man. He is generous and attentive to the law. He fasts twice a week and gives away a tenth of what he earns. But our judgement changes a little when he begins to compare himself with others. He needs to see himself as being better than others. He seems to despise those who are less well able to obey God's laws. Like me in the supermarket he looks for evidence that

may give reason to criticise another. And he doesn't have to look very far does he. He noticed on the way in that right at the back of the temple there was a despised tax collector. A man who worked for the occupying government had no right to put his nose in the door. He was unclean.

If we were in the Pharisee's shoes perhaps, we would have prayed as he did. We probably would have thanked God that we were not like that tax collector. It would have been easy for us to remind God of all the good things that we do. But once we had started to do that would we be praying to God or praying to ourselves?

The Pharisee went into the Temple to pray but he doesn't seem to look at God at all. His focus is upon his own goodness and upon the sinfulness of the tax collector and those like him. Luke tells us that he prayed to himself.

If he had looked at God and focused in on God, then his prayer would have been quite different. He would not have had to make a list of the good things that he was doing. He would have understood that he was looking at the source of everything that was good within him. He would have seen a gracious and merciful God who had a very special place in his heart for tax collectors and others like him. He would have been able to sing the psalm that we prayed today. "The Lord hears the cry of

the poor. The Lord is close to the broken hearted; those whose spirit is crushed he will save.”

If his focus was on God, then he would have understood that he didn't really need to say anything to God. He just needed to let God speak to him of his love for him. And as he listened to God, he would perhaps have heard the humble prayer that the man at the back of the temple was whispering to God: “be merciful to me a sinner.” This was the prayer of someone who was not looking around and comparing himself with others. This was the prayer of a man who knew that he was a sinner and in need of God's mercy and forgiveness. And this was why his prayer was heard. He knew how much he needed God. We are told that he went home at rights with God. He was justified, not by anything that he did, but by the pure gift of God's mercy.

You and I are part of a world that does not like to admit of its own weakness. We are good at looking into the shopping trolleys of others but don't notice what is in our own. We are good at seeing the weakness of others but are slow to admit that our selfish behaviour impacts on the lives of others. Many of our sins are sins of omission. We do not choose to hurt people, but we do not notice the ones around us who are hurting and in need. In our busy lives we rush past those who may be waiting for us to notice them. At the end of our lives

many of us will be asking Jesus, “When did we see you hungry or thirsty or sick and in need of a visit?”

When we can recognise our sinfulness and know our need of God's mercy then our prayer becomes much more real. It is then that we are open to change. It is then that like St Paul we can allow the power and the love of God to be at work in our lives. St. Paul spoke about that today when he told Timothy, “But the Lord stood by me and gave me power, so that through me the whole message might be proclaimed for all the pagans to hear.”

Supermarkets can be places where we are tempted to make judgements about others. But they need not be. They can be places of community where we stop and say hello to people. A word of encouragement to a young mum trying to manage a tired toddler or two as well as a trolley might be greatly appreciated. Supermarkets can be places of prayer. We can thank God for the people who grew and produced the food that we are buying. We can thank God for the people who stock the shelves, help us to find the custard and serve us at the checkout. And if we do notice that there are sausages rather than steak in someone else's trolley perhaps we can thank God for what we have and pray for a generous heart to share what we have been given.