

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Over these weeks we have been invited by Luke to reflect upon how we pray. Last week we heard Jesus tells us that we need to be persistent in our praying and not give up when our prayers don't seem to be answered. Today we are asked to look at where our prayers are focussed.

I have to admit that my prayer is often not focussed on the one to whom I am praying. Often in times of prayer my mind is like a dog that is freed from its leash. It runs around everywhere until I call back to where it was meant to be. I remember reading a little Catholic Truth Society booklet that was entitled "My Mind Wanders." The follow up to that one had the title "My Mind Still Wanders." Mind you, I think the Lord is sometimes in that wandering and he takes the opportunity to remind us of things that we have left undone, or of the people we need contact, or the gifts for which we are yet to thank him.

When we listen in to the prayer of the Pharisee, we notice that his mind wanders away from the God to whom he is meant to be praying. He can only think about himself. He is generous and attentive to the law. He fasts twice a week and gives away a tenth of what he earns. But he also 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. 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 and really had no right to put his nose inside the door of the temple.

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 our prayer would have lost its focus.

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: “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 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, much more focussed. 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.”

Perhaps this week as we pray, we might begin by asking God to keep us focussed upon him as he reveals himself to us as the God of mercy, the God of compassion. Then we can let our mind wander to the places where we need to show that mercy and compassion to others.