

30th Sunday Year C 23rd Oct 2022

Our readings today continue the theme of prayer. There have been hundreds, in fact thousands of books written on prayers - books with prayers in them, both ancient and new; books on what prayer is and books on how to pray.

But today, we hear in our Gospel reading, one of the most heartfelt; one of the most honest and one of the shortest prayers - "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

It has reminded me of three patients I met several years ago at the hospice where I am a chaplain - but I will return to that in a moment.

As I've reflected and prayed about today's readings, one of the commentaries I've read this week has been very helpful to me.

We've heard the Pharisee's prayer: "I thank you, God, that I am not grasping, unjust, adulterous like the rest of mankind, and particularly that I am not like this tax collector here. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes on all I get."

The commentary made me reflect on what the tax collector might have prayed instead.

He might well have said "Lord, look at the Pharisee standing up there so that everyone can see him praying. He thinks he's better than everyone else. He despises people like me. Look at the long robes he's wearing to make himself feel Holy and attract attention to himself.

Everything he does is to boost his self-esteem and bring honour to himself, rather than to you Lord.

He makes sure he gets the seats of honour at banquets and in the synagogue. He loves it when

people salute him in the market place and call him "Rabbi".

He's obsessed with silly rules but neglects the things that really matter - like justice and mercy.

He's good at laying down the law for others but he doesn't practice what he preaches.

Please Lord, don't be taken in by him. It's all an act. It's all just a show. He's not genuine. He may look clean on the outside but inside he's full of corruption. He's the biggest hypocrite I know.

That is what the tax collector could have said. And you could argue that the Lord could have replied "I agree with every word you have said."

But we know that the tax collector did not say these things. Instead he simply said "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

The Pharisee confessed the sins of others and then added a list of his own good deeds as well.

The tax collector did the exact opposite. He confessed his own sins and left the sins of others between them and God.

And we hear Jesus tell us that it was the tax collector who went home at rights with God - the Pharisee did not.

Unfortunately, it is easy for us to be more like the Pharisee than the tax collector - I know I am certainly guilty of this. When we focus on the sins of others we run the risk of being blind to our own sins.

It is my great privilege to be a hospice chaplain - especially so when I meet people like the three patients I mentioned earlier. All three were a similar, relatively young age. All were born and brought up as practicing Catholics and all had turned their back on the Church; turned their back on the Lord, as soon as they were able to leave home.

All three had similar tales of being let down by those who should have cared for them - and one in particular had suffered horrible abuse. But as they realised that they were dying, they reflected on what was really important to them.

They were all desperate to receive Holy Communion once more - but what was so humbling to me was that they all asked (in fact begged) for me to arrange the Sacrament of Reconciliation for them first.

They all said, in so many words, the same as the tax collector today "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

They did all receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation. They did all receive the Sacrament of Holy Communion. And they did all die at peace. They did all go "home at peace with God."

I think, unfortunately, we can sometimes fear confession. We can be ashamed of our faults and sins. We can be worried about what the priest will think; worried about what God will think. It's easier sometimes to focus on the sins of others rather than our own.

But Jesus tells us "Do not be afraid".

All that waits us in the confessional is the overwhelming mercy and love of the Lord. Like the Father in the parable of the Prodigal son, he is waiting and watching and longing for us to turn back to him. He is waiting to run to us and wrap his forgiving arms around us.

I urge you not to wait until you are dying in a hospital or hospice bed. The graces and blessings that await us in the confessional are all the graces and blessings of heaven; the only limits are our ability to truly comprehend them.

As we all know Fr Andrew has recently become Parish Priest to the communities of Donnington, Melbourne and Ashby - so he is a busy man. But I am sure (in fact I'm certain) he will be delighted to be kept busy in the confessional.

Each church will have a weekly Holy Hour when Fr Andrew will be available to hear confession - or if those times don't suit please just ask and he'll be happy to arrange a separate time. The times are listed in the weekly newsletter.

The community of Our Lady of Lourdes, Ashby are well aware of my devotion to St Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and that my claim to fame is that I was very blessed to have met her. So, any chance I get, I like to finish with some words of hers.

She said:

"Prayer is not asking. Prayer is putting oneself in the hands of God, at his disposition, and listening to His voice in the depth of our hearts."