

HONESTY - NOT SALESMANSHIP

The readings this Sunday once again are about prayer. The first reading taken from the book of Sirach tells us how God definitely listens to prayers. He is a "God of justice who knows no favorites. Though not unduly partial toward the weak yet he hears the cry of the oppressed. The Lord is not deaf to the wail of the orphan nor to the widow when she pours out her complaint." The author then goes on to say that "the one who serves God willingly is heard; his petition reaches the heavens." The whole point is that God listens to all who pray to him openly and honestly whether they are affluent and high born or are among the less fortunate in society. Yet it would seem that God is a bit biased toward the weak and the lowly and perhaps deep down most would agree that such a view certainly fits a loving and all-powerful God. The whole point is that God treats everyone equally for in his sight we are all created equal as humans.

Then in the second reading taken from Paul's second letter to Timothy, we hear Paul describe how he has conducted his life, giving his all for the Lord and how now he is being poured out as a libation. In a way one can easily think that Paul is simply telling Timothy just how great he is. But this is not his intent; he simply is trying to tell Timothy that everyone who gives their all to the Lord and follows him as closely as possible will certainly receive the great reward of eternal happiness in the Kingdom awaiting all who believe in Christ. Yet the whole section of Paul's letter still sounds very much like he is boasting of what a great man he really is.

Then finally, in the Gospel we hear that well known story of Christ about the Pharisee and the Tax Collector both praying in the Temple, the tax collector leaving justified while the Pharisee is somewhat condemned for his self styled holier-than-though attitude. In the end, one can get a bit confused as to just what is the message that the Church wants everyone to get from these readings as we hear Christ say that the tax collector left justified while the Pharisee left being humbled and hopefully would correct his ways.

The question comes down to the fact of just what is the thread of faith going through all these readings? From the remarks of Jesus about just who was justified or not justified in his story it is easy to conclude that the tax collector is a good man while the Pharisee is not. When the Pharisee says that he is thankful to God that he is not like the tax collector one can conclude that the Pharisee is a judgmental character who doesn't see the humble worth of the tax collector. But this distracts from something else much more important, namely that the Pharisee is in fact trying to sell God on how really good and holy he is in comparison to the tax collector, whereas the tax collector is very simply acknowledging that he is in fact doing wrong (tax collectors were notorious for gauging the people to make them pay more than they should while they themselves got richer from this open larceny) and he is openly and honestly admitting it to God and asking him for forgiveness of his sin. With bowed head he is not just praying, he is begging God in his mercy to forgive him of his sins. In no way is he telling God that he is really a good guy! His prayer also includes between the lines how repentant he truly is and that as part of his prayer he is asking God to help him reform his ways.

Getting back to the Pharisee, when he prays thanking God that he is not like the tax collector in a very real way he is thanking God for giving him the strength not to do or wish to do the wrong things. Without God's help he is admitting he would be just as bad as the other man. Yet one must not overlook the fact that the Pharisee is also trying to do a sales job on God getting him to know just how great he really is, way better than that other fellow. In the silence of our hearts I suspect that most believers could admit that deep down they want God to know that they are really great people! Such a prayer carries the unspoken request that God not overlook their real faith in him. Such thinking (or praying) is so human yet at the same time quite contrary to what we do or should believe. It is the humanity in each of us.

There is also another message in all these three readings. God is not telling us how to live our lives, how to act in all occasions, how to live as truly his children but to also focus on the fact that God is completely understanding and regardless of what we may be doing wrong or thinking wrongly or just presuming he will overlook most of our wrong but best intentioned acts, he will forgive every wrong doing with absolutely no exceptions. What it all comes down to is the fact that God wants each and every single human he has created to have a very close relationship with him.

We also cannot overlook the way Paul speaks to his protégé Timothy making himself out to appear as the greatest Apostle ever. Paul was a most unusual Apostle. He was raised and lived the most perfect life he could as a strong Israelite. He was by far the strongest believer ever in the religion of Abraham, Moses, the prophets etc. He went all out to even give his life for his beliefs if necessary. And God in a very special way, came to him personally to call him to be his follower and his Apostle to the Gentiles. However God came to Paul on that road to Damascus or later during his long stay in the desert, Paul emerged as the greatest of all Christ's followers and leaders. His strong beliefs, his even stronger convictions, and above all his absolute love of Christ were so obvious and so inspiring in all he did and above all in all he said and wrote, all together not only brought people to become believers but inspired them to live their faith totally.

In his letter to Timothy he is not just trying to impress Timothy but to somehow show not just what awaited him as a true believer and follower of Christ but everyone with no exception. His enthusiasm was totally contagious. And when one even today reads this letter one cannot help but feel themselves begin to get carried away with the true meaning and consequences of their faith in Jesus Christ. The scriptures and various writings in our Church are more than just words; they are the reality of what we believe and of what will happen with certainty to all who struggle to follow Christ as closely as possible. Try to catch just a bit of the enthusiasm of Paul and savor it as divine truth which one day WILL become reality in all our lives from here to eternity! To experience this one has to try to live their beliefs, not just think about them. And no better way than to have it all revolve around the Mass, the ultimate gift of God to those he loves.

Fr. Andy, S.J.