

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year C

30th Sunday of Ordinary Time

First reading:

(Sira 35.15-17, 20-22)

The Prayer of the Humble

The Book of Sirach was translated into Greek by the grandson of the author. The grandfather wrote in Hebrew. He was a wise, witty and sometimes cynical teacher of Jerusalem, who gathered and built on the pithy sayings of the sages.

The first part of this reading, about the widow's persistent appeal to the Lord, may well be the basis of last Sunday's parable of the persistent widow and the unjust judge. Did Jesus build his parable on this piece of wisdom of the ancients, or did Luke use the Book of Sirach to expand Jesus' teaching?

So also the second part of the reading, which prepares us for today's parable of contrasting suppliants, proud and humble, in the Temple: did Jesus build on the ancients or Luke?

Jesus certainly heard and learnt from the holy books of Judaism. Whether Jesus directly used it or not, the message of the two parts is clear in the phrase that joins them: whoever whole heartedly serves God will be accepted. There is no pretending in prayer. As a wise old priest once said to me: 'In prayer you can stop pretending to be Queen Victoria or a poached egg.'

Question:

What is the best short prayer you know?

Second reading:

(2 Timothy 4.6-8, 16-18)

Paul's Farewell

This is the last Sunday reading from the 'Pastoral Letters', addressed to Paul's assistants, Timothy and Titus. Fittingly, it is a summing up and defence of his mission, according to the literary conventions of the time.

We do not know where the trial he mentions took place, or the eventual outcome, although the tradition holds strong that he was martyred in Rome (and his severed head bounced three times, giving rise to three fountains, the famous Tre Fontane).

In his letters, Paul several times mentions imprisonment, but nowhere a formal trial, so that we can only guess. Did he set out on further journeys, even to Spain, after his confinement in Rome? We do not know. The sporting images of 'the good fight' and the 'race' are typical of Paul, and also the image of a libation, the first few drops from a cup of wine, offered in homage to a divinity. But most of all we are reminded that Paul had long yearned for death and to be fully united to his Lord and ours: 'Life to me, of course, is Christ, and death would be a positive gain' (Philippians 2.21), although he was held back by the positive need for his energetic guidance.

Question:

Can you make any of Paul's self-defence your own?

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Gospel:

(Luke 18.9-14)

The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

These two figures are stock characters, sketched with Luke's brilliant wit and sensitivity. The gospels invariably give the Pharisees a bad press, since after the destruction of Jerusalem they were the only surviving branch of Judaism, so stand for the vigorous opposition of Judaism to Christianity at that time.

The Jewish historian, Josephus, paints a sympathetic picture of them, and Matthew's picture of them as the personification of hypocrisy may be a caricature of their fussiness of observance.

Jesus played them at their own game in the careful interpretation of scripture, although with more profound understanding; was he a Pharisee too? Preoccupation with exact observance of rules can often appear to outsiders as hypocrisy. At that time a tax collector was the epitome of malpractice, extortion and abandonment of all decent standards. He worked for the hated Roman occupying power; he had to make his own living by extorting excessive tax.

So this is one more example of the reversal of all expected values, and Jesus' outreach to those generally despised, the woman notorious in the city as a sinner, the woman taken in adultery, Zacchaeus and the 'good thief'. It beautifully fulfils the first reading: 'the prayer of the humble pierces the clouds.'

Reflection:

God be merciful to me. I am a sinner.
